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THE MONEY GODS

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BY

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To
Dr. and Mrs. L. D. Shepard

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CHAPTER I

Hide And Seek

Outside the open window, clustering ramblers flecked the wall with crimson, and the ceaseless murmur of the questing bees filled the midsummer air with melody. No other sound disturbed the silence of the study, where Marshall Hamilton, President of the Standard Bank, and his secretary, Hugh Bellingham, sat facing one another at the table in the centre of the room. One by one, the capitalist was disposing of the documents before him, working rapidly, but with the absolute precision acquired by years of experience in the world of high finance. A note here, a numeral there, a word of explanation to the secretary; at length he had completed his task.

"That will be all, Bellingham," he said curtly. "When you've attended to these, you may have the rest of the day to yourself. I'm expecting some friends to play golf."

Bellingham rose, picked up the papers from the table, and with a murmured word of thanks made his way slowly up the broad staircase to his pleasant, airy room at the top of the house. Yet it was evident that he viewed the prospect of a holiday with indifference, for as he seated himself at his desk and gazed forth over Marshall Hamilton's broad acres, the look upon his face was one of discouragement bordering on despair, while his thoughts, gloomily disconsolate, were divided between pity for himself and envy of his employer. How would it feel, he wondered, to change places with the banker, if only for a day, and to become the owner of these well-kept lawns, these groves of birch and pine, the hills and valleys of the links and the sea-blue river winding its leisurely way through the green and fertile meadows on its journey toward the sea. That would indeed be happiness, and more glorious still would be the knowledge that he was one of the "big men" of Wall Street, not only a multi-millionaire, but a director in a score of huge companies and the organizer of mighty enterprises. For an instant, as he sat staring into the sunshine and letting his fancy roam at will, he almost succeeded in realizing his dream, but the next moment, with a sudden start, he came to himself again--Hugh Bellingham, private secretary at a salary of two thousand a year, and with debts so urgent and so impossible of payment that the very thought of them was a perpetual torment, causing him anxious days and sleepless nights, and robbing his life of all pretence of happiness. "Money," he reflected, "I've got to find it. A lot of it, too. Ten thousand dollars, at the least. But Heaven knows where it's coming from, and if I don't have it soon--"

A shrug of his shoulders completed the sentence, and rousing himself with a sigh from his vain imaginings, he turned to the papers before him and was about to begin work in earnest when he heard the patter of footsteps coming swiftly down the hallway toward his room, and at the sound shook his head in humorous despair. "Young Marshall," he said to himself. "No chance for writing now." And scarcely had the words passed his lips when the door flew violently open and Marshall Hamilton, Junior, a handsome boy of seven, burst explosively into the room, and without wasting time on preliminary greetings, hastened to announce the purpose of his visit.

"I say, Hugh," he cried, "I've finished my lunch, and Miss Wilton's still at the table, stuffing like a pig. So let's play hide and seek."

Abruptly, Bellingham swept his papers together, thrust them into the drawer of his desk, and rose acquiescently from his chair. "Very well, sir," he rejoined, "if you say hide and seek, then hide and seek it is. And I suppose you want me to be 'it' so that you can have all the fun and make me do all the work."

But the boy shook his curly head. "No, no, Hugh," he cried, "you're wrong about that. *I* want to be the hunter; that's the mostest fun. And don't you hide--" he added, raising an admonishing finger, "in any easy baby place like curtains, the way you did last time. I want to have a real 'citing hunt, so you must choose the hardest place you can. Now then, I'll give you a fair start; I'll count three hundred by ones. Ready, Hugh--" and seating himself in the chair which the secretary had just left, he buried his face in his hands and began to count rapidly to himself in a buzzing undertone, while Bellingham, crossing the room on tiptoe, made his way quickly out into the corridor, wondering where he might find a hiding place sufficiently inaccessible to satisfy the aspirations of the hunter.

Near the turn in the hallway, he paused opposite the picture gallery; and, seized by a sudden impulse, entered, closed the door behind him, and for a moment stood motionless, temporarily blinded by the transition from the glare outside to the semi-darkness within. Presently, however, his sight returned to him, and at once, in the vague half-light, he became aware of an uncomfortable feeling that the ancestral Hamiltons upon the walls were peering down at him through the gloom with a hostile and disapproving gaze, as though resenting his presence in the room. But time pressed, and the secretary, still governed by the impulse which had bade him enter, did not stop to analyze this impression, but instead turned hastily from the unfriendly portraits to the four suits of massive armor which flanked the door, bulking

grimly upon their pedestals, survivals of those far-off days when the fighting Hamiltons of old had girt their swords about them, and had gone blithely forth to do battle with their foes. Toward the nearest of these Bellingham made his way, and a few moments later stood safely entrenched within his shell of steel, securely hidden from view and smiling to himself as he reflected that he had unquestionably found a place difficult enough to test the ingenuity of his pursuer.

The seconds passed. Evidently the boy was making a thorough search of Bellingham's chamber, for no sound disturbed the quiet of the gallery until all at once, with a swiftness which made Bellingham start, he heard the door suddenly opened and closed again, and immediately afterward became aware that someone was hastily crossing the room. For the moment, with his field of vision restricted by the bars of his helmet, he could not tell who the visitor might be, yet he felt certain that the footsteps could not be those of a child, and the next instant proved that he was right as there appeared before his startled eyes the figure, not of the boy from whom he was hiding, but of Marshall Hamilton himself. A singular time, thought the bewildered secretary, for his employer to be visiting the gallery, and the banker's subsequent actions were more remarkable still, for walking directly up to one of the portraits, a dignified Hamilton of the seventeenth century with ruff at neck and sword at side, the financier stopped short, listened for a moment, and then, casting a quick glance over his shoulder, raised his hand and apparently touched some portion of the picture, whereupon, to Bellingham's amazement, the portrait, frame and all, swung smoothly back; the banker, without hesitation, stepped quickly through the orifice thus made, and an instant later the picture had slipped noiselessly into place again, and all was once more silent in the room.

For the moment, Bellingham experienced nothing but the most intense astonishment, yet almost at once this feeling gave place to one of apprehension and dismay, for it was only too evident that the exit which he had just witnessed was something which he had never been meant to see, and that if his eavesdropping should be discovered, he would be placed in a position of obvious embarrassment, and perhaps of actual danger. And moreover, since young Marshall was a great chum of his father, it seemed equally clear that if the boy should find the secretary's hiding place, news of it would inevitably come to the banker's ears; and accordingly Bellingham, without losing an instant, made haste to emerge from his place of concealment, and stepping quickly to the door of the gallery, opened it just in time to hear the boy's voice crying impatiently, "Make a noise, Hugh; I can't find you. Make a noise, quick."

Like a flash, Bellingham darted across the hall, entered a spare bedroom, and with a sigh of relief dropped behind a table, at the same time calling aloud to guide the hunter. Instantly the boy came storming down the hall, captured his quarry in triumph and began clamoring eagerly for another game. But fortunately for Bellingham, Miss Wilton, having completed the process of "stuffing like a pig," now appeared upon the scene and took command of her charge.

"You're to come driving with me, Marshall," she announced, and turning to the secretary, she added, "And Miss Helen wishes to know, sir, if you would care to play a round of golf with her at five o'clock?"

Bellingham, his mind still in confusion, stood staring at her as if he found it difficult to comprehend her words, but at length he managed to answer, with an effort, "Yes indeed, I'll play with pleasure," and as the boy and his governess disappeared down the staircase, he stood for some moments gazing after them; then with a muttered, "Well, I'll be damned," he turned on his heel, and walked rapidly away down the corridor.

CHAPTER II

Tangled Threads

Bellingham's first act, upon regaining his room, was to close the door tightly behind him, as if to prevent the possibility of pursuit. After which, he resumed his seat at his desk, and lighting his pipe, leaned back thoughtfully in his chair, and began to consider at his leisure the strange scene which he had just witnessed in the gallery. A more imaginative man might perhaps have wondered if his eyes had not deceived him, but Bellingham, being of a prosaic and matter-of-fact disposition, did not dream of questioning the evidence of his senses. Yet to solve the riddle of his employer's conduct was a problem which was wholly beyond him, and although various vague conjectures suggested themselves to his mind, he immediately dismissed them as being too improbable to be worthy of consideration. Drink could not be the answer, nor could drugs, for Marshall Hamilton, although a man of more than middle age, was aggressively healthy, with a body of iron and nerves of steel. Intrigue seemed to the secretary to be a more plausible explanation, and yet scarcely a likely one, for the banker's devotion to his invalid wife, and his affection for his daughter and for his little boy were unmistakably genuine and sincere. More probable appeared the supposition that the sliding panel might be the entrance to a vault, where the capitalist could keep important documents and securities. But whatever the secret might be, the secretary felt certain that it was on no slight and trivial errand that the banker had visited the gallery, for in the three years during which he had served his employer he had long ago discovered that

Hamilton's huge responsibilities made his outlook upon life essentially a serious one. And while it was quite possible that if someone else, of lesser interests and of greater leisure, had thus vanished through a wall, the incident might have seemed frivolous and amusing; yet where Marshall Hamilton was the man in question, Bellingham felt that the occurrence was of genuine significance. All his efforts to solve the mystery, however, were in vain, and presently realizing that he was accomplishing nothing, and that his correspondence was still unfinished, he came to the sensible conclusion that he was wasting his time, and accordingly set to work upon his task and a couple of hours later had completed it, just as Martin, the butler, knocked at the door and entered to leave the afternoon papers upon the secretary's desk.

Bellingham thanked him, and at the same time advanced a chair and pushed a box of cigars across the desk, for Martin's personality, and his position in the Hamilton household, were both distinctly out of the ordinary. Tall and smooth-shaven, with a keen and penetrating eye, there was something in his appearance suggestive of the ministry; yet this impression was a false and misleading one, for while it was true that the butler had interests and aspirations far beyond his station, yet these interests were the very reverse of ecclesiastical. The stock market, the wheat pit, the cotton exchange--these were the absorbing passions of his life; his ears, sharp as those of a fox, were trained to lose no word that fell, at table, from the lips of his master and his master's friends; and whether it was owing to this, or to natural shrewdness on his part, his ventures had prospered so amazingly that he occupied a position in the eyes of his fellow-servants almost as dignified and exalted as that of his master in Wall Street.

Now, with a respectful inclination of his head, he seated himself, helped himself to a cigar, and in answer to the secretary's question, "Well, what's new, Martin?" he answered, "Stocks were very strong to-day, sir. Steel crossed one hundred and twenty-nine."

"The devil!" exclaimed Bellingham. "You don't mean it!" And forthwith turned eagerly to the papers, for while in his present impoverished condition he had no personal interest in the market's ups and downs, yet in the atmosphere of finance in which he lived it was part of his duty to have at his fingers' ends the daily fluctuations in cotton, stocks and grain. For some moments he studied the pages of the *Journal* in silence; then handed the paper to Martin, observing, "Well, you're right. And there's the explanation, too."

The butler took the paper from Bellingham's hand, and read, in staring headlines, at the top of the page, "Bull market continues. Marshall Hamilton and Cyrus McKay both said to favor the advance. Steel booked for two hundred."

Martin's eyes glistened. "Mr. Bellingham," he asked earnestly, "do you imagine, sir, that this is true?"

The secretary, with the unbiassed mind of the man who has no stake in the game, meditated for a moment, then answered truthfully, "My dear Martin, I haven't the remotest idea whether it's true or not."

The butler looked visibly disappointed. "If you happen to hear anything, sir," he said in a tone so low that it was almost a whisper, "you know what I mean, sir--any letters or telegrams--I should be most grateful if you'd remember me, sir."

Bellingham nodded. "I'll be glad to," he answered, with just the suggestion of a smile, for the combination of Martin the decorous servant and Martin the eager speculator was one which never failed to amuse him. Then, impelled by mere curiosity, he added, "Which is it this time, Martin? Are you long or short?"

The butler's face was impassive, but his voice was eager with the irrepressible passion of the gambler. "I'm short, sir," he answered. "Quite heavily short. I have every reason to believe, Mr. Bellingham, that we are going to see a severe decline in the market. Unusually severe, sir. But of course I may be wrong."

Bellingham glanced at the papers with renewed interest, running his eye up and down the narrow columns of figures which summarized, in this brief space, the prosperity or the adversity of the entire world. "They're awfully strong," he commented, "and the gains run through the list, too. Locomotive is up four, Crucible three and a half, Steel five. And the rails are strong, too. By Jove, Martin, I believe you *are* wrong. Be careful you don't come a cropper. Have you any real reason for thinking the market isn't going up?"

"Why, sir," the butler answered, "you may remember that about three months ago it was generally supposed that we were on the brink of a panic. But I am confident that at that time Mr. Hamilton and Mr. McKay and the other gentlemen were buying very heavily indeed. And if that is so, sir, why it hardly seems probable that they would be adding to their purchases now, when stocks are thirty or forty points higher than they were then. In fact, sir, if it's not an impertinence upon my part, I think that if you were to sell Steel short on a scale up--"

But Bellingham interrupted him. "My dear Martin," he observed with a smile, "when a man has dallied with the market all his life, as I have, and suddenly ceases either to buy or to sell, there is usually just one answer," and raising his hand, he formed, with thumb and forefinger the figure zero.

The butler flushed. "I beg your pardon, sir," he said hastily. "I didn't intend--I meant it in a friendly way, sir--"

"Of course you did," Bellingham good-naturedly interposed, "and I appreciate your tip, Martin. I'm only sorry I can't take advantage of it, but I hope you make a million. Oh, and by the way," he added, as the butler rose to go, "would you mind telephoning Saunders to saddle the bay mare? I'll be over right away."

Ten minutes later, on his way to the stables, he met Helen. Hamilton returning from the garden, her arms heaped high with flowers.

"You're not forgetting our golf?" she asked. "Miss Wilton said that you would play."

"Yes, indeed," he answered, "I'm only going for a turn. I'll be back in plenty of time." And as he continued on his way, he found himself thinking, as he had done a hundred times before, that his employer's daughter approached more nearly to his ideal than any other girl whom he had ever seen. He admired her beauty, her charm, her thoughtfulness of others, and most of all he liked the friendliness of her smile and the frank and fearless glance of her dark brown eyes. "No nonsense about her." That was his invariable summing-up of her character, and her friendship had been the pleasantest feature of his employment at Marshall Hamilton's.

Once astride the mare, however, he had no further chance for meditation, for his mount had stood idle for two days, and now seemed to be doing her level best to pull his arms from their sockets, and to break his neck into the bargain. But after he had made the circuit of the lake, and had turned her head toward home, she behaved more sedately, and subconsciously he had already begun to think again of the adventure in the gallery when all at once, as he neared the entrance to the links, the whole affair was suddenly revived by the appearance of Cyrus McKay's motor, drawn up by the side of the road, the chauffeur, a thick-set, bullet-headed young Irishman, sprawled comfortably on the seat, cigarette in mouth. "I'm expecting some friends to play golf." He remembered his employer's phrase, and at once drew rein beside the car.

"Hullo, Jim," he hailed, "how are you? Mr. McKay on the links?"

"Sure," the chauffeur answered, with a yawn. "I brought him out here two hours ago, and I've just come back for him now. So I guess he's had some game."

"Yes, indeed," agreed Bellingham, "it's a perfect day for it, too. You'll find you'll be waiting another half hour yet."

The chauffeur stretched himself luxuriously, happy in the mere enjoyment of the pine-scented air and the languorous warmth of the sun. "Well," he grinned, "it won't worry me any; I'll put my time against his. But on the level, Mr. Bellingham, don't it beat hell? When the boss is working, he's the busiest guy in Wall Street; a minute is worth a thousand dollars; I'm on the jump the whole blamed time. And then he'll come out here to Mr. Hamilton's and waste a whole afternoon chasing a little white ball around a field, making half a dozen rotten shots to every good one. Honestly now, can you beat it?"

Bellingham smiled. "It's relaxation, Jim," he answered, "and that's what the big men have got to have. That's all that keeps them going. Whoa, girl, whoa," for the mare, impatient at the delay, reared straight upward and began to paw the air frantically with her forefeet. There was a momentary struggle while Bellingham coaxed her back to earth again, calling over his shoulder to the chauffeur, "Good-by, Jim, see you again." Then, yielding to a fleeting impulse, he added, "Where are you keeping the car now? I may drop in and see you some day."

"Wheeler's garage," Nolan answered. "Find me there about noon, most any time," and Bellingham, giving the mare her head, arrived at the stables in greater perplexity of mind than ever. "So he's been playing golf," he reflected, "just as he said he would, and according to Jim Nolan, Mr. McKay came to the links at half past two. But that was just the time when I was in the gallery. So Mr. Hamilton couldn't have stayed there long; that's certain. Probably he went straight over to the golf course. But I was working at the window, all that time, and I should surely have seen him. And it's a safe bet that a man can't be in two places at once. So what the devil does it all mean, anyway?"

The village clock was striking five as he and his partner reached the hill which overlooked the first tee. Jock McKenna, the professional, practising faithfully for the open championship, was just making ready to drive, while on the green, two hundred and twenty yards away, a half dozen small white objects bore testimony to the stocky Scotchman's deadly aim. Helen laid her hand restrainingly on Bellingham's arm. "Let's watch him," she whispered, and McKenna, unconscious of his audience, drew back with the free, effortless swing of the born golfer, while the ball, like a shot from a gun, skimmed away toward the fluttering flag, struck, bounded, rolled, first with vigor, then more and more slowly, until it came to a final stop hole high and only a hair's breadth to the left of the green. Helen, with the enthusiasm of a true lover of the game, clapped her hands involuntarily. "Oh splendid, Jock," she cried, "that was a beauty," and the professional, looking quickly up at them, smiled and touched his cap, not ill pleased that his shot had been appreciated.

An instant later, they had joined him upon the tee. "Well, Jock," asked Bellingham, "how did Mr. Hamilton come out with Mr. McKay? I suppose he won, didn't he?"

The professional stared. "'Deed, and there's been no match to-day," he declared. "And more's the pity, for the course was never as good as now. Young Mr. Marshall was down this morning, skelping up my turf for me till I fair had to drive him away, but nobody else has played a stroke."

Helen Hamilton, paying no heed to their talk, had teed her ball, and now, with a deliberate and well-timed swing, sent her ball straight down the fairway for a hundred and fifty yards. "Very good, Miss Helen," was McKenna's comment, "you're improving all the time. What handicap does Mr. Bellingham give you now?"

"A stroke a hole," she answered, "but I only take it to humor him. In another month I shall beat him even."

She spoke chaffingly, and Bellingham answered in similar vein, "Nonsense, I could give you two strokes instead of one," but his thoughts, as he swung, were far distant from the game, and a topped and sliced tee shot came to rest in a sand-trap near the seventeenth green.

Helen Hamilton laughed aloud, and the professional half smiled in sympathy with her triumph, half frowned in disapproval of this most inartistic shot. "You've played golf enough, Mr. Bellingham," he said reprovingly, "to make it a shame for me to have to say 'You didna follow through,' like I would to some beginner. But that was the trouble, man; you checked your swing as though you were no thinking of the shot at all."

"My club turned in my hand," said Bellingham absently. "The grip's worn smooth." But as they started for the green, he was saying to himself, "So they played no golf. And if they weren't on the links, where were they? That's one mystery. And the second is, no matter where they were, what on earth were they doing?" And greatly wondering, he walked onward toward the trap where his misplayed ball lay buried in the sand.

CHAPTER III

The Golfers

The Hamilton estate was bounded upon the north by the main highway, and between the road and the hills and valleys of the links extended a strip of woodland, about a quarter of a mile in width, and covered with a dense growth of hemlocks, birches and tall pines towering upward toward the sky, while at the base of these forest giants briars and brambles, shrubs and bushes, had been permitted to grow unchecked, until they had formed a network of underbrush so thick as to be well-nigh impassable.

Upon the same day, and almost at the identical hour when Bellingham stood gazing open-eyed after his employer's vanishing form, a man came slowly through this strip of woodland, proceeding cautiously, with the practised step of the forester, along a path so narrow and so overgrown that it was practically invisible. Yet the man was apparently familiar with his surroundings, and apparently, too, he was not merely a forester, but a huntsman as well, for he carried a gun slung over his shoulder and his clothes and cap of faded green harmonized so perfectly with the underbrush that his furtive progress along the path was almost imperceptible. Slowly and noiselessly he advanced until he had drawn near to a clump of huge firs, set in a natural circle and distant about a hundred yards from the trail which led to the links. Here he paused and dropping on his hands and knees crept through the bushes and entered a hutlike shelter, artfully woven of growing shrubs, where he lay effectually concealed, commanding, through a narrow orifice, a perfect view of the approach to the clump of firs. Next, with leisurely precision, and with no trace of excitement upon his bronzed and weather-beaten face, he proceeded to unsling his weapon from his back and to make it ready for use; and as he did so, one further circumstance became apparent--namely, that he was a huntsman who did not care for noise--a poacher, perhaps--for what had resembled a gun now proved to be an old-fashioned crossbow, of rare and curious workmanship, and this bow the huntsman bent, and then, adjusting the murderous looking bolt, settled down to wait in comfort until his quarry should appear.

Silence descended upon the forest; a silence so profound that it seemed as if animals, birds and insects, all were slumbering amid the quiet of the summer afternoon. Surely, the huntsman had poor prospects of success, yet if this were so, he did not appear to care, but lay motionless, resting quietly, with ears upon the alert and eyes fixed steadily upon the clump of firs.

The moments passed. Then, presently, far up the road, sounded the throbbing rhythm of a motor, and a half a minute later Cyrus McKay's big car drew up at the gateway leading to the links, and McKay, founder and President of the National Wire Trust, stepped leisurely forth, a huge, burly, bull-necked man, with power written in every line of his ruddy, jovial face, in every movement of his big body, and in every glance of his shrewd blue eyes. With something of an effort, he reached for his golf bag, and with a nod to the chauffeur, said, "All right, Jim. Come back at half past four."

The chauffeur touched his cap; the big car turned and sped smoothly down the road, and McKay, left alone, started slowly along the pathway toward the links. Apparently, he anticipated a pleasant afternoon, for as he strolled along he whistled boyishly, burst occasionally into snatches of song, and presently, some distance up the path, he stopped for a

moment, drew a white feather from his pocket and adjusted it carefully in his cap; after which he seemed suddenly to alter his mind regarding his destination, for striking boldly off from the trail, he began making his way through the waist-high underbrush, directly toward the clump of firs.

As the sound of the motor had died away in the distance, the huntsman in the thicket had redoubled his vigilance, and now, as the crackling of the bushes grew more and more distinct, his keen eyes swept searchingly about the glade and his fingers tightened upon the stock of his weapon, as if it were for human game that he was thus lying in wait. Yet if this were the fact, it was clearly not McKay whom he was expecting, for as the latter's bulky form loomed into view the hunter relaxed his grip upon his crossbow, and once more resumed his attitude of patient watchfulness.

In the meantime McKay had reached the edge of the circle of firs, and with a shrug of distaste for the ordeal that lay before him, he settled his cap more firmly on his head, and guarding his face with his upraised arm, he at length succeeded in forcing a passage through the close-knit barrier of the trees. Then, extracting a key from his pocket and achieving, not without difficulty, a kneeling posture, he cleared away the soil until a square of steel came into view, and fitting a key to the lock, he threw back the door and disclosed a flight of stone steps, down which, with the utmost nonchalance and as if he were conducting himself in a perfectly normal manner, he promptly disappeared, carefully closing the trap behind him. At the foot of the short flight of steps he paused for a moment, and drawing a flashlight from his pocket proceeded briskly along the narrow passageway, stoutly shored and timbered, until he presently emerged, through a second door of steel, into the underground chamber where Marshall Hamilton stood awaiting him.

The room itself was simply--almost barely--furnished, and in appearance was as conventional as the method of approaching it was unique. The only furniture was a heavy mission table and four chairs to match; a massive safe was set into the wall; at one end of the room stood an old wooden desk, elaborately carved and inlaid, and at the other a sideboard bearing glasses, decanters and cigars.

The two men shook hands with the ease of long acquaintance. "On time, as usual," Hamilton observed.

McKay drew a chair up to the table and sat down. "The others will be here?" he asked.

"Any minute," Hamilton responded with equal brevity. "They come from the south, this time," and the words had scarcely passed his lips when the door opened to admit James Norton, the "Cereal King," and Vincent Brooks, senior partner in the famous banking house of Brooks & Harrington. Brooks was a tall, fair man, often described by his friends as "a fellow who had been dealt every card in the pack." In other words, he had been welcomed, from the day of his birth, into the most aristocratic society in New York, was immensely wealthy, and possessed, into the bargain, great natural ability and a wonderful aptitude for "big business," where the figures ran into billions, and the risks and the rewards were alike staggering to the imagination. Norton, on the other hand, was almost his exact opposite, a dark, eager man of forty, fairly dynamic with energy, who had been favored with no cards by Fortune, and who had thereupon fared blithely forth and had collected an entire pack for himself. In the Wall Street district he had first been hated and despised as an upstart, but later had been made welcome as a man too shrewd and forceful to be ignored.

Immediately the four men seated themselves around the table, and Hamilton, drawing a sheaf of papers from his pocket, proceeded to call the meeting to order and for perhaps fifteen minutes read steadily, interrupted now and again by a comment or a query from one or the other of his associates. At the conclusion of his task, there followed approval and acceptance of his report, the carrying of various formal motions, and then began a low-toned, informal talk between the four, apparently entirely harmonious until McKay and Norton became involved in a discussion which gradually increased in intensity until at length they had the conversation to themselves, Brooks and Hamilton listening with an intentness which made it evident that the subject was one of vital importance. Finally McKay, with the utmost earnestness, spoke at length, summarizing and emphasizing his arguments with all the skill at his command, but when he had concluded it became evident that his efforts had only served to increase Norton's opposition, for the Cereal King struck the table before him with his clenched fist, crying, "No, no, McKay, you're absolutely wrong. You're altogether too conservative. Life is short, and so I say: Let's get all we can."

At this outburst McKay only smiled, and instead of answering he turned to Hamilton. "Would you be kind enough, Marshall," he asked, "to read to us once more the statement showing our profits for the year?"

Hamilton found the document referred to. "Gross," he answered, "seventy millions. Net, after deducting all payments and expenses, forty-two millions."

"Thanks," said McKay briefly, and to Norton he added, "Well, my boy, that makes precisely ten millions and a half apiece for the four of us, to say nothing of what we've disbursed to our subordinates, or of the sums that have been realized by our friends across the water. In the face of such a showing, do you maintain with seriousness that we may be termed ultra-conservative?"

"That," responded Norton with spirit, "is exactly my contention. It's not the actual financial results, in dollars and cents, that I'm criticizing, for as you say, ten millions and a half of sure money is a satisfactory income for anyone. No, my objections are based purely on artistic grounds. When you consider--"

But McKay, with a huge burst of laughter, broke in upon him. "Artistic grounds!" he exclaimed. "Good Heavens, man, you might accuse us of plenty of other things, but not of being inartistic. Why, that is our strong point--our trump card. If we're not artistic, we're nothing."

Norton shook his head. "Only in a sense," he retorted. "In the same way that we hark back to the beginnings of any art. For their age, they sufficed, but in the light of later knowledge and achievement they are bound to appear pitifully crude and inadequate. And so it is with us. Forty years ago the founders of our society were the ablest financiers of their day, and the system which they inaugurated was wonderfully efficient for that period. But think of all that has happened in forty years. Think of the increase in population, the increase in wealth, the increase in the number of enterprises, of corporations and combinations, of securities upon the stock exchange. And yet, in spite of this, we are still satisfied to conduct our business along the old primitive lines of forty years ago. Why, I could take pencil and paper now, and in two minutes I could suggest improvements that would increase our earnings a hundred, two hundred, three hundred per cent. I'm absolutely certain of it."

"I quite agree with you," McKay responded quietly, "there's not a doubt of it. But the answer is: What's the use? Here's a parallel case for you. Suppose, somewhere in some mountain wilderness, you were to come by chance upon an undiscovered stream, simply filled with trout so hungry and so unwary that they would rush ravenously for your bare hook. Under such conditions, would you use bait?"

"Not at first," rejoined Norton. "I'll admit that. But you don't complete your parallel. After a while, as your supply of fish begins to diminish, you will find that those which are left will grow wiser and more suspicious. And that is the time when you will need all your skill, and must use your choicest bait."

"No, no," McKay protested warmly, "that's not a fair argument at all. We are not discussing some possible time when fish grow wise. We are confining ourselves to facts; my premise is that you can catch all you need with your bare hook. And when four men--" he added, with a wave of his hand toward the papers on the table, "can make forty million dollars in twelve months, without half trying, it certainly doesn't appear as if our human fish were possessed of any great supply either of caution or of brains."

Brooks, man of few words, nodded approval. "Right," he interjected. "You're quite right, Cyrus." And to Norton he added significantly, "You don't want to fish out your brook, Jim. If you do, you'll go hungry."

Norton's eyes gleamed. "Perfect rot," he persisted. "That's the same old 'safe and sane' chatter I'm so tired of hearing. In the first place, you can't fish the brook out; there's one born every minute. But wouldn't I like to try it, though. I'd like to start right now; there never was a better chance; and for the next twelve months do nothing else except slaughter the innocents. Big fish, fingerlings, I'd keep 'em all. Never a one would I throw back into the brook to grow. Why, just imagine what we could make, if we once started after it. We'd murder 'em; crucify 'em; skin 'em alive." And he licked his lips covetously at the thought.

McKay's brows contracted. It was not the first time that his own views and those of his younger associate had come into violent contact. "Oh, if you aspire to be a game hog, a professional butcher--" he began, but at this point Marshall Hamilton, who had maintained an unbroken silence, allowing the debate to range unchecked, suddenly leaned forward in his chair. "One moment, Cyrus," he said courteously, "may I interrupt you?" And as McKay assented, the banker continued, "This figure of the trout brook is a very appropriate one, but neither of you has quite completed the picture. To make the parallel exact, you must include a very important person, and that is the owner of the stream."

Norton stared. Then, with the respect which was invariably accorded to the financier, he objected, "I don't think I follow you, Mr. Hamilton. Who is this owner? I should say that we come pretty close to being the owners ourselves."

"No," Hamilton answered, "we are not the owners. There are times when it might appear so, but we must not allow ourselves to be deceived. We are nothing more than poachers--bold, formidable and successful poachers, I admit--but none the less poachers for all that. And though the owner of the stream is stupid and careless, slow to anger and to realize that he is being robbed, still we must never forget that he exists and that when once aroused his power is irresistible."

Brooks looked frankly puzzled. "I cannot suppose, Marshall," he said quizzically, "that after the highly uncomplimentary adjectives you have been using, you are venturing to refer to the individual mentioned in the prayer books as the 'High and Mighty Ruler of the Universe.'"

"No," Hamilton answered briefly, "this is the twentieth century. I'm not bringing God into the discussion in any way."

"I don't understand you either, Marshall," broke in McKay. "I disagree with Norton in many respects, but I do agree with him in this--that so far as this enterprise of ours goes, we are supreme. Whom do you designate as this owner of the stream? Surely not the Law?"

There was a general smile. "No," Hamilton drily responded, "scarcely that. As far as the Courts are concerned, I suppose we may fairly claim that we *are* the Law."

"And the Profits--" interjected Brooks under his breath, but Hamilton was too much in earnest to heed him, and continued, "No, the owner of the stream is the Public, and the weapon we have to fear is the intangible but terribly effective one of Public Opinion."

"Oh, the Public," commented Norton flippantly, "well, as Vanderbilt said--"

But Hamilton went on gravely. "I assure you that I am quite serious. Our one possible danger is that some day the Public may learn the truth. You all know that periodically, after some spectacular rise or equally spectacular decline in prices, there is sure to be a terrific bleating from the victims, and a plaintive demand that someone must investigate the New York Stock Exchange. Of course these demonstrations don't amount to anything--it's child's play to check them--but if we should adopt Norton's suggestion and should play the game to the limit, then the danger would be correspondingly increased, and if some day the truth should become known--"

Norton interrupted him. "But that is impossible," he declared.

"Impossible," retorted Hamilton, "is a dangerous word. I acknowledge that it is highly improbable--thanks to the founders of this order for taking the precautions that they did--but it's not impossible. There is always 'the plaguy millionth chance.' And grant," he added with increased emphasis, "that the truth should become known; admit, for the sake of the argument, that the public should find out what has been happening to their money for the last forty years, and where would we be? I'll tell you where. We'd be marked men, fleeing for our lives, and never safe from vengeance, even in the uttermost corners of the earth."

No one gainsaid him, and the gravity of his hearers' faces was sufficient confirmation of the importance of what he said. "You're right," Brooks assented. "Quite right," McKay agreed. And Norton, convinced in spite of himself, added thoughtfully, "Well, perhaps you are."

"I'm sure of it," Hamilton answered, "and now, gentlemen, it is time to go. When shall we meet again?"

"I suggest day after to-morrow, at the same hour," said McKay. "To-morrow will be a big day in the market, and we shall have a number of things to discuss."

"Yes, the time is ripe," Hamilton responded, "it is a wonderful opportunity."

"How far will cotton decline?" asked Norton.

"I should say, off-hand," answered Hamilton, "a couple of hundred points, at least. But that will be decided, of course, in the usual way. We can tell better after the first break."

"And wheat," queried Brooks, "will go up?"

"Exactly," said Hamilton. "The conditions there are exactly reversed. The advance will be sharp."

He walked over to the sideboard, filled his friends' glasses, and then raised his own high in the air, glancing, as he did so, at the old desk across the room.

"Here's to our predecessors," he said gravely. "The men who came here forty years ago. The men who have made us what we are to-day."

CHAPTER IV

A Flurry in the Market

It still lacked five minutes of ten o'clock, the hour for the daily opening of the Stock Exchange, but the board room at Holt and Henderson's was already filled to suffocation, and presently, as more and more clients came hurrying through the doors, so little space remained that as the crowd surged to and fro frequent forcible collisions became unavoidable. Yet while at any other time these gamblers would promptly have resented this jostling and scrimmaging, now they were so preoccupied and so intent upon their own affairs that they never thought of wasting time, either in apologizing themselves or in demanding an apology from those with whom they had come in contact.

The gathering would have repaid the studies of a psychologist. It numbered at least two hundred men, and apparently every rank and condition of society had furnished a representative. Well-dressed gentlemen rubbed elbows

with ragged tipsters and hangers-on of Wall Street; a famous musician examined the "chart" of a no less famous artist; a coachman confident of a rise in July oats swapped theories with a farmer who foresaw a fall in December corn. But though in appearance so strikingly dissimilar, yet in one respect all these men were startlingly alike; not one of them seemed wholly normal. Their aberration displayed itself in various ways. Some were unable to keep still, but moved continually hither and thither, from the news ticker to the newspaper files, from the newspaper files to the bulletin board. Others, though content to remain in one spot, were unable to control their tongues and talked incessantly, the intensity of their speech and their nervous laughter showing the strain under which they were laboring; while others still, of a less friendly temperament, maintained an unbroken silence and a sullen aloofness from their companions.

Occasionally, here and there, small groups collected to discuss one subject, and one only--the future of the three great markets. "Well, what do you know?" was the common salutation, while now and then a customer, seemingly disregarding the grim significance of the phrase, would propound the jocular query, "Well, what are they going to do to us to-day?" Questions, answers, comments, filled the air. "London's up." "How's Liverpool?" "It's a big bull move; they've only started 'em." "I think they're toppy; you can sell 'em on the rallies." So ran the talk of the speculators, vapid and valueless, without end or beginning, and begotten of the fever which consumed their veins.

At one end of the office was a narrow alcove in the wall, just wide enough to contain a single chair, and this seat was now pre-empted, as it had been for the past month, by a man who at least in appearance presented a marked contrast to his fellow gamblers. He was young and exceptionally good-looking, with the build and bearing of an athlete, while his clear-cut features betokened not only birth and breeding, but also no lack of determination and tenacity of purpose. His whole attitude, indeed, suggested confidence in himself, and the occasional glances which he bestowed upon his companions were somewhat disdainful, as though he despised them for their excitement and their lack of self-control. Yet he himself, although quite unaware of it, was not exempt from the universal nervousness of the office, for every few moments he cast a quick glance upward at the clock, and repeatedly drew from his pocket a small memorandum book, studying it as the patron of the race track examines his wagers before the beginning of a race.

The hands of the clock pointed to ten o'clock; a bell tinkled sharply; and the tickers, like sprinters shooting from their marks at the starter's signal, commenced clicking and whirring at breakneck speed, while Demming, the red-headed, pot-bellied customers' man, began bellowing forth the quotations with an air of omnipotence which suggested that he alone was responsible for all that was taking place. "Crucible, ninety-four," he cried, "Union, one hundred and fifty-three; Steel, one hundred and twenty-seven and a half," and then, to divert his audience, and to show that he was a genuine humorist, he dropped into the time-honored slang of the street, and with a smirk of self-appreciation, went on chanting, "Annie Connolly, one hundred and five; Old Dog, sixty-two; Soup, par and a quarter."

The young man in the corner listened eagerly, noting the prices, as the board boys posted them, with an approving eye. "Still strong," he said half-aloud, "they're going up, all right," and he had settled himself to watch in comfort the rise that was to make him rich when one of the employees of the office came hastily up to him.

"If you please, Mr. Atherton," he said respectfully, "Mr. Holt would like to see you for a moment, sir, in his office."

Atherton looked at him in surprise. "Are you sure you have the right name?" he queried. "I don't like to leave the board just now."

"Yes, sir, I'm sure," the man responded. "In fact, Mr. Holt said that he particularly wished to see you at once."

Atherton rose. "Very well, then," he answered shortly, "if it's as important as that, I'll go."

In the private office he found both partners seated at the long table in the centre of the room. Holt was tall, dark and solemn; Henderson short, rosy and never without a smile; so that almost inevitably they had become known to employees and customers alike as "Joy" and "Gloom." They greeted him pleasantly enough, and after he had taken a seat, Holt picked up a card from the table and with a preliminary clearing of his throat, observed, "Our margin clerk has called our attention, Mr. Atherton, to the state of your account, and I thought that I had better speak to you about it."

Atherton, with the touchiness of a very young man, at once took offence. "I wasn't aware," he said stiffly, "that my account was not in good shape. But if you object to it, I suppose I can take it elsewhere."

At this retort, Mr. Holt's solemnity visibly increased, but the smiling Henderson, at his best in such an emergency, came promptly to the rescue. "Now, now, Mr. Atherton," he remonstrated, "don't be so hasty. There's nothing wrong with your account as it stands, and it's an account that we're very glad to have in the office, and that we don't wish to lose. But Mr. Holt is merely suggesting to you, for your own good, that you are rather crowding things. You've been carrying twenty-five hundred shares of Steel; yesterday, at the close, you bought twenty-five hundred more. And as your deposit with us is just about fifty thousand dollars, it is obvious that you are getting pretty close to the danger line."

"Quite so," Atherton acknowledged, "but that is my lookout. As long as I keep my ten point margin good, why should you worry?"

"That," resumed Mr. Holt, "is exactly the question. Are we to understand that in the event of a decline in the market, you stand ready to deposit additional sums as we may require them?"

"No," Atherton answered frankly, "you're not to understand anything of the sort. All the money I have in the world is in here now. But the market is going up and you're not obliged to worry about more margin; if there should be a drop, then we can talk things over again."

Mr. Holt heaved a sigh of impatience. "You young men, Mr. Atherton," he complained, "are all alike. You are too cocksure about everything. Now you can't tell anything about this market; it may go up; it may go off; but to try to carry five thousand shares of Steel on a ten point margin is absolute madness--I've been in the brokerage business long enough to know that. Sell out half your holdings, Mr. Atherton, and then, if a drop comes, you won't be giving us all nervous prostration."

Atherton frowned. He had calculated his profits so many times that the thought of seeing them cut in halves did not appeal to him in the least. "I don't want to sell," he demurred. "I tell you this market *can't* go down. The Steel Corporation is earning more money than at any time in its history. Everyone says it's going to cross two hundred. So don't be too particular about my margin; they don't always insist on ten points in other offices."

"More fools they," retorted Holt briskly, but Henderson, foreseeing in Atherton's attitude the possible loss of a good customer, hastened to make a suggestion.

"Personally, Mr. Atherton," he observed, "I think Mr. Holt is quite right. We've been in this business a long time, and we've seen many a good man embarrassed for lack of sufficient margin. But if you feel confident that we are in a big bull market, and are willing to take your chances, we will carry you, provided you will sign an order authorizing us to sell you out if steel reacts to one hundred and twenty. In other words, you give us a stop loss order for our protection, and take your chances of being caught. It's rank gambling on your part, Mr. Atherton, and we won't always agree to carry you overnight, but if it is an accommodation to you, we will carry you along from day to day, and give you the opportunity of making a big killing if the market goes up."

Atherton reflected, and obsessed as he was with the idea that the market was going much higher, Mr. Henderson's scheme impressed him favorably. With his stock selling at over one hundred and twenty-seven, a recession to one hundred and twenty seemed impossible, and by signing the stop loss order he would be enabled to hold the whole of his five thousand shares. Accordingly, since it was no time for delay, he made up his mind at once and promptly answered, "Very well, I'll do it."

At once Mr. Holt selected a "sell order" from the printed slips upon the table, filled in the figures agreed upon, and Atherton, hastily signing his name, hurried back to the board room to find, to his delight, that Steel had advanced to one hundred and twenty-eight. This, however, appeared to be a critical point in the struggle, and while the transactions increased to enormous proportions, the fluctuations narrowed correspondingly. Up an eighth, down a quarter, up an eighth again, while every few moments Demming's voice could be heard roaring vociferously, "A thousand Steel--three thousand Steel--five thousand Steel--"

Eleven o'clock came, and twelve, and Atherton, in view of the market's steadiness, decided to go out to lunch. But the grip of the game had laid its spell upon him, and without the board before his eyes he became so nervous and ill at ease that he ate his meal at breakneck speed, raced hurriedly back to Holt and Henderson's, and drawing a breath of relief as he regained the familiar entrance, he thrust open the door and went in. Yet scarcely had he crossed the threshold when he realized that during his brief absence from the office something sensational must have occurred. The room was in a turmoil; a bedlam of sound filled the air; a mob of dishevelled customers fought their way madly toward the windows of the order clerks, elbowing and shoving each other this way and that in their frenzied eagerness to buy or sell. Waters, regulator of margins, ordinarily the coolest man in the world, now stood in the rear of the office, crimson-faced, perspiring, sorting and shuffling a sheaf of customers' cards in his hands, and sending his subordinates rushing hither and thither in pursuit of those unfortunates whose slenderly margined accounts were either already submerged or in imminent danger of becoming so at any moment.

All this Atherton saw in one lightning flash of vision; the next moment his eyes leaped to the board and he gasped to see in the Steel column the figures, one twenty-four, while in the same breath he heard the voice of Demming, hoarse and exhausted, but still powerful, roaring out "Union, one forty-nine; Reading, one hundred and three; Steel, one twenty-three and seven-eighths, three-quarters, five-eighths, a half--"

In a second the calm and confidence of the past few weeks, born of a rising market and the conviction that he was making his fortune, vanished utterly, leaving him weak, trembling and panic-stricken. No longer despising his fellow gamblers, he grasped the first who passed him by the arm. "What's up?" he cried. "What the devil's happened?"

"War!" the man shouted in reply. "War with Japan! Battleships and submarines off the Pacific coast! A whole fleet of 'em. Hell to pay. I'm going to sell 'em short, right here."

He rushed away in the direction of the order clerks, leaving Atherton perplexed and dismayed. A short distance away from him he noticed a man, apparently calm amid the confusion, whom Demming had once pointed out to him as the best judge of the market among all the customers of Holt and Henderson. Without the loss of a moment, Atherton walked up to him. "What do you think of 'em?" he asked anxiously, "Are they going lower?"

The man did not take his eyes from the board, but answered courteously enough, "I can't tell. It's a big bear raid. I've thought for the last few weeks the big men were getting out."

"But I thought all the big men were in" protested Atherton. "That's what all the papers have been saying."

The trader grinned sardonically. "There's a lot in the papers that oughtn't to be there," he rejoined, "and there's a long sight more that isn't there, but ought to be. There's only one explanation of this. The public are ninety-five per cent long of stocks, and the insiders are getting them! That's all; it's the same old game."

Atherton reflected. "But the warships--" he queried.

"All in your eye," was the trader's response. "It will be denied to-morrow. But they're doing just as much damage," he added, with a gesture toward the board, "as if they were real. When the crowd takes fright, it's all over. Down go stocks, and then the big men load up again at the bottom, and sell again at the top. It's what you might call a crime, if you dared to."

At this new view of the stock market, Atherton felt more perplexed than ever. "Then you think they'll rally?" he ventured.

"Sure," his informant agreed, "but you can't tell how much lower they'll go first. It all depends on how heavily the public is in the market. I know what the bears are aiming at, and that's one hundred and twenty on Steel; that was the old low, six weeks ago. If it goes through there, good-night."

Atherton shuddered, for by coincidence this was precisely the point at which his stop order would be reached. Yet he hesitated to put much confidence in this stray acquaintance and his theories. Big men slaughtering the public so wantonly, false reports in circulation, prices being swayed, not by basic conditions, but by manipulation and by such strange fetishes as "new lows"--if all these things were true, his faith in human nature and in the goodness of the world had been sadly misplaced. "But look here," he objected, "Steel*can't* go down like this. Why, the earnings for the last quarter--"

The trader's grin widened, and for the first time he turned away from the board and gazed squarely at Atherton, as if at some new and interesting specimen of mankind. "Earnings," he repeated vaguely, and still again, more forcibly, "*Earnings!*" And at last, as though realizing the inadequacy of speech, he muttered tolerantly and not unkindly, "Oh, hell--" and turning on his heel, walked over toward the board.

Atherton, bewildered and abashed, stole back to his alcove, and sat down to watch the progress of the fight. In his mind, he pictured to himself the rival armies--the bears red-faced, scowling, domineering men, objectionable to a degree, pirates of the Exchange, attempting to wreck a stock like Steel; the bulls sane, conservative men of affairs, shrewd judges of fundamental conditions, men, in fact, much like himself. And he could not doubt that the bulls would win. Up went Steel an eighth, and he thrilled with pride for those who were defending it; down it went a quarter, and he shook with fear of these reckless raiders and highwaymen.

And so the battle raged. Two o'clock came and went, and suddenly Atherton realized the sensations of a wearied fighter in the ring, striving to hold his own until the clanging of the gong to mark the end of the round. "If only it holds another hour," he thought. Then he would at least have a respite until the following morning, a chance to decide matters at his leisure without this frightful accompaniment of sound and fury, this whirling maelstrom of men seeking desperately to make new dollars or trying more desperately still to cling to the dollars they already owned. If the market would only hold--

But even as these thoughts were shaping in his mind, there came a furious onslaught from the bears. One hundred and twenty-three for Steel, twenty-two and a half, twenty-two, twenty-one and three quarters. He could feel the blood surging to his brain, and his hands clenched as though he were fighting physically for victory. Then a rally and a long fight around twenty-three. But he could feel, with a gambler's instinct, that there was no life to the advance, and sure enough, as he had feared, presently the tide began once more to ebb. Twenty-two again, twenty-one and a half, then suddenly, with a bull-like bellow from Demming, one hundred and twenty-one, twenty and seven-eighths. For the fiftieth time he glanced up at the clock; two, thirty-five; only twenty-five minutes more, but less than a point lay between him and virtual ruin. His lip trembled, his knees shook under him, and without realizing that there was anything incongruous in such a proceeding, he began to pray fervently, imploringly--

In the midst of the group which thronged, five deep, around the ticker, suddenly arose wild commotion. Atherton could discern faces frenzied with joy; other faces torn with anguish; heard, above the tumult, some one cry shrilly, "They've done it!" and the next instant, Demming, in tones of incredulous wonder, was reporting the cataclysm, "Union, forty-eight, seven, six; Reading, ninety-nine, eight, seven and a half; Steel, one hundred and twenty, nineteen, eighteen, seventeen, *sixteen*--"

Atherton stood dazed, benumbed; the blow had fallen so quickly that for a moment he could not grasp the truth. Then all at once he knew--knew that he had lost not only the fortune he had sought but most of the capital which he had risked to gain it. Steel at one hundred and twenty; he would have fifteen thousand dollars left; but instantly he recalled

the lightning speed of the sheer drop to one hundred and sixteen, and wondered whether he had been fortunate enough to escape at the stop loss figure. There was but one way to find out, and mingling with the crowd, he fought his way to the order clerk's window, and presently caught the eye of Curtis, his particular friend among the office force. The clerk shook his head dubiously. "No word yet, Mr. Atherton," he called, "everything is away behind." And thus, for ten minutes which seemed unending, Atherton maintained his place until at last Curtis bent quickly forward, scribbled some figures upon a piece of paper, folded it, and handed it through the window. Atherton seized it, made his way back to the alcove, and tense with excitement, unfolded it to see staring up at him the figures 117-5/8. His fears were realized--deducting commissions, his account was practically wiped out of existence. And suddenly a frenzied desire seized him to leave the place and never to see the inside of a broker's office again. There was a moment's delay at the cashier's window, and then, residue of the fifty thousand he had staked, there came back to him a check for thirteen hundred and forty dollars and seventy cents. He thrust it into his pocket, and started for the door.

Around the board the storm was still raging, but now a different note was in the air. "Steel, one twenty-one," he heard, "twenty-two, three and a half, twenty-four." The trader whom he had questioned stood in his path, and recognizing Atherton, he said, "They've turned. Just as I thought. Warship story's denied. All a mistake; Japan expresses warm friendship. They'll come back strong now. You can buy 'em right where they are."

Without answer, Atherton passed on. In his heart smouldered a fierce resentment--a bitter hatred of everybody and everything connected with the gambler's trade. Forgetting, for the moment, that he had only himself to blame, he felt that he had somehow been tricked, deceived, robbed. And as he opened the door, and banged it to behind him, the last sound which rang in his ears was Demming's frenzied shriek, "Steel, twenty-six and three-quarters, *twenty-seven!*"

Outside, in the street, the world was bathed in sunshine. Overhead the sky was blue. About him, on every side, men and women were going about their appointed tasks, alert, smiling, unbelievably happy. Of a sudden Atherton's vision cleared, and in a flash of readjustment, he realized, for the first time, the incredible folly of what he had done.

CHAPTER V

Fools Rush In

Bellingham was alone in his room. Before him, on his desk, lay letters from his creditors, and beside them a timetable of the local trains. The telephone leading to the stables stood within easy reach of his hand, yet he made no effort to lift the receiver from its resting-place, but remained irresolute and motionless, a picture of indecision. Over and over again, during the last two days, he had tried to make up his mind as to the course he should pursue, but his endeavors had been unavailing, and he was still as far from a conclusion as ever.

Upon one hand, Decency and Caution combined to warn him. Urged Decency, "You are living under Marshall Hamilton's roof; accepting his money; eating his bread. By the merest chance, you have seen something which you were never intended to see. In loyalty to your employer, you should dismiss it from your mind, and never think of it again." And Caution added, "All that Decency says is true, and you must remember that there is a further consideration, which is more important still. That is your own safety. There is a mystery here, and it is the experience of mankind that mystery, as a rule, goes hand in hand with danger. You may not be satisfied with things as they are, but do not forget that nothing is ever so bad that you cannot make it still worse. Therefore you will be wise to drop the whole affair, once and for all."

Thus argued Decency and Caution, but opposed to them, in Bellingham's troubled mind, were another pair of powerful allies, Desperation and Curiosity. Clamored Desperation, "If you cannot find the money to pay your debts, your creditors will very shortly complain to Mr. Hamilton. There is no doubt of that; the proof of it lies in black and white on the table in front of you. And when Mr. Hamilton learns of your financial condition, he will discharge you at once; that is one point about which he is most particular. You will lose this position, and you will have difficulty in finding another; and thus you will drag through life a failure, with the millstone of debt bound fast around your neck."

So, with pitiless candor, spoke Desperation, and Curiosity, knowing the glamor of adventure and the charm of the unknown, added alluringly, "This is no ordinary mystery; Marshall Hamilton and Cyrus McKay are two of the biggest men in New York. Opportunity, they say, knocks but once, and this may be your life's turning-point. You cannot disregard it."

Thus the secretary gave ear to all these arguments in turn, but in the end it was the promptings of Caution that he heeded most, for the primary instinct of self-preservation told him that life, even to a man hampered by his debts, was

still much to be preferred to death and oblivion. Yet it was hard for him to think of wholly abandoning the undertaking, and presently it occurred to him that there was more than one method of solving the mystery, and that a compromise was not in the least impossible. It was true that Marshall Hamilton had vanished through a picture in the wall, but it was also true that Cyrus McKay had disappeared into the woods adjoining the links; and while Caution counselled him to avoid the gallery, Curiosity, on the other hand, persistently insisted upon a vicarious pursuit of McKay.

Nolan, of course, was clearly the man for the job. He drove his employer to the golf course; therefore he had the opportunity. He was physically strong and courageous; therefore he would not shrink from danger. And he was pleasure-loving and always in debt; therefore a reward would be certain to appeal to him. Beyond question, Nolan was the man.

"But is it right," asked Decency, "to send someone else where you would not venture yourself?" To which query Desperation promptly answered, "Oh, in this world you can't be too particular; it's a case of each man for himself. There probably isn't any danger, anyway, and if you should get hold of anything really valuable, you can make it right with Nolan later."

Thus the discussion ended. "I'll try it," decided Bellingham, and taking the receiver from the hook he telephoned to the stables and ordered the motor in time to catch the next train for town.

An hour later, he emerged from the subway, and made his way rapidly down the street in the direction of the garage where Nolan kept his car. A sense of guilt oppressed him, and though he realized that his fears were wholly groundless, he could not prevent himself from casting occasional furtive glances to left and right, as though apprehensive of pursuit.

At length he came to the garage, and hailing the first workman whom he met, inquired if Nolan were around. The man jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Back of the shop," he answered briefly. "Sixth floor. Freight elevator. Run it yourself." And went on with his task.

Bellingham made his way in the direction indicated, entered the elevator and pulled the rope, and began his leisurely ascent past floor after floor littered with cars--cars new and old, cars good and bad, cars whole and cars dismembered--until he came to the sixth story, where he stopped the elevator and to his joy discovered Nolan, cigarette in mouth, seated placidly upon a bench at the end of the room, superintending repairs, real or imaginary, upon Mr. McKay's machine. Thrilling with renewed excitement, the secretary walked over to him, and Nolan, when he recognized his visitor, greeted him cordially.

"Hello, Mr. Bellingham," he cried. "Didn't expect to see you quite so soon."

"Oh, just a little business matter," the secretary replied, trying hard to make his voice sound nonchalant and under control. "Walk over as far as the window, and I'll tell you what I want."

Nolan rose at once, and as soon as they were safely out of earshot, Bellingham continued, "Look here, Jim, do you want to make some easy money?"

The chauffeur grinned, and for answer inserted thumb and forefinger in the pocket of his coat, exposing the empty lining. "Ah, say," he rejoined, "don't ask me none of those easy ones. Try me with something hard."

Bellingham felt his spirits rise. "That's the way to talk," he said, "and here's what I want you to do. You remember taking Mr. McKay out to Mr. Hamilton's day before yesterday to play golf. Well, he didn't play; I know that for a fact. And what is more, I believe that he and Mr. Hamilton have some kind of secret meeting-place near the golf links. So the next time you go out there, I want you to drive away as usual, and then, after you round the first curve in the road, you can stop your car, double back along the wall, and trail after him to see where he goes. And for your trouble, Jim, I'm going to be just fool enough to give you fifty dollars."

Nolan deliberated. Fifty dollars was worth making, but his job was a good one, and he had no wish to lose it. "Well," he answered at last, "here's one trouble, right away. The boss is a pretty wise old guy, and this trailing business is a new game for me. The betting is that I trip over a tree, go on my nut, and when his nibs turns around and asks me what the devil I'm doing there, why where's my alibi?"

"Alibi?" echoed the secretary. "Why, that's easy; there's nothing to that at all. Mr. McKay keeps his clubs in the machine, doesn't he?"

"Yes, always," rejoined Nolan. "They're in there now."

"Then that settles it," said Bellingham. "All you need to do is to take out his putter and hide it under the seat. Then when you start after him, take the putter with you, and if by any chance he sees you coming after him, just wave it around your head and tell him it dropped in the car and you knew he needed it. How about that?"

"That," agreed Nolan, "is certainly good. Pretty smooth, I call that."

"Then you'll do it?" asked Bellingham eagerly.

The chauffeur did not hasten his reply. "Well," he said at length, "I suppose I'm taking chances, after all, and I figure that if the job's worth fifty dollars, it's worth a hundred."

The secretary did not stop to argue. "Very well," he assented, "a hundred it is."

"And it's also worth," the chauffeur continued, "just about twenty dollars down, to bind the bargain."

Bellingham drew out his pocket-book; then hesitated in his turn. "But how do I know," he objected, "when you will be going out there again?"

"That's easy," Nolan answered, "because we're going this very afternoon. So you're bound to get some action for your money, all right."

Bellingham felt his nerves tingle with excitement, and without further protest he handed the money to the chauffeur. "Good for you, Jim," he said. "I'll be here to-morrow, at this same time, and I'll give you the balance then."

"I'll be here," Nolan agreed, "and now I must get back and see that those strikers don't put my car to the bad. If she don't run perfect, I'll get it from the old man. So good-by, Mr. Bellingham."

"Good-by," echoed the secretary, and descending as he had come, he walked quickly away up the street, greatly wondering what news Nolan would have for him on the morrow.

Promptly at half past two, that afternoon, Cyrus McKay's motor stopped at the gateway leading to the links, and as before McKay alighted, took his clubs from the machine, and said to the chauffeur, "Four thirty, Jim."

There was no sign of anything unusual in Nolan's manner. "Yes, sir, four thirty," he answered, and touching his cap, he turned his car and sped briskly away for the city. Yet no sooner had he turned the curve of which Bellingham had spoken, than he began swiftly to execute his plan. Drawing in to the side of the road, he shut off his power, extracted his employer's putter from under the seat, and tossing his cap, with its conspicuous black visor, into the car, he vaulted the wall and began to work back toward the path. Fortune favored him, for the underbrush had gained no hold upon the smooth masonry, and he was able to make rapid progress, so that only a short time elapsed before he regained the entrance to the links. His next task was to find some trace of his employer, but a quick glance down the path revealed nothing and Nolan, puzzled, walked straight ahead toward the links, casting quick glances to right and left of him as he advanced. Presently, halfway down the trail, a twig snapped to his left, and quickly turning his head, he saw McKay slowly forcing his way through the bushes in the direction of a circle of huge firs. At the sight, Nolan's usual calm deserted him, and his pulse beat faster. "There *is* something queer, then," he thought, and bending low he crept stealthily after his employer, like a hunter stalking his game.

Little by little, favored by his slighter build, he gained upon McKay until the distance between them had been decreased one-half, whereupon he tried to gain no more but was content simply to keep pace with the man whom he was trailing. Straight onward toward the firs McKay made his way, and when he reached them, instead of turning aside, he stooped and began to seek an entrance through their branches' barricade.

Nolan felt his wonderment increase. "The Devil," he murmured, and fearful lest he might lose sight of his employer, he sacrificed safety to speed, and stole rapidly onward until he too had reached the border of the trees. Ahead of him, he could faintly discern his master's form, and the continual snapping of twigs made it evident that he was still advancing. For a moment Nolan stood motionless, uncertain what to do. His heart was beating violently. If he continued to follow, the pretext of the forgotten putter could hardly serve him as an excuse; if he went on from this point, it was at his own risk. And suddenly, for no apparent reason, fear seized him. In the shelter and silence of the forest, he seemed to himself to shrink and grow small; the solitude oppressed him; and he stood like a man in a dream, scarcely breathing and noting, subconsciously, the beauty of the rifts of sunlight which filtered through the trees. "I guess," he muttered, "I'll be getting back." But even as he spoke the words, there sounded behind him a faint twang, as of a cord released--

He was running, running and leaping magnificently, running as he had never run before. Whither he was going, he could not tell, for the power of sight had left him, but he felt that he was travelling through space with incredible speed. A singular buoyancy had permeated his whole being, so that it seemed to him that he was no longer upon the earth, but was whirling over sea and land and sky. Onward he swept, still onward--

But now, little by little, he could feel that his speed diminished, and that he was struggling upward, like some submerged and drowning swimmer, from darkness toward the light. Slower and slower he ran, more slowly still--

His eyes opened. He was lying among the bushes, flat upon his face, and he realized that he was in frightful pain, and that he gasped painfully for breath; something was choking him; throat and lungs were filled with it. And as his brain cleared, suddenly he knew, although too far spent to conjecture what had befallen him, that he was very near to death. He tried to move--

There was a trampling in the bushes, and a man in faded green stood over him. Then he felt himself roughly seized by the chin, his head was bent back, further, further--something gleamed and glittered in the sunlight--

Calmly, and without emotion, the huntsman stood looking down upon the murdered man. "Only three," he murmured, "in all these years. One in my father's time; two in mine." And after a pause, he added, "How could this man have known? And is he the only one, or will others come to tempt their destiny?"

CHAPTER VI

Misery Meets Company

Daylight was fading; the shadows of the trees lengthened upon the grass; yet Atherton made no move to leave the park, but still sat motionless, oblivious to everything except the turmoil of his thoughts.

From the office of Holt and Henderson he had walked blindly along, heedless of his destination, until as he had neared the lake a sudden weariness had seized him and he had sunk down upon a bench to rest. For a time, he could scarcely convince himself of the reality of what had occurred; seen in retrospect, it all appeared fantastic and of the texture of a dream. But at length, as the afternoon wore on, and the shrill clamor of the newsboys filled the park, he purchased a paper and when he read, in black and white, the story of the day's decline, his last hope vanished and he knew that this was no nightmare, but reality, and that financially he was a ruined man.

At first, the burden of his calamity seemed too hard to bear. Fifty thousand dollars! While he had possessed it, never dreaming of its loss, he had not appreciated its magnitude, but now that it was gone, he realized what a sum of money it was. So marvellously easy to lose; so tremendously difficult to regain. But presently, since he was young, and by no means a coward, he managed to recover his courage. He had made a bad mistake, but so had other men; he had a difficult task before him, but others had faced problems still more difficult, and had triumphantly solved them. Therefore he resolved that beginning with to-morrow he would put the past behind him, and would think only of the future; but this afternoon he would not try to plan--his brain was weary and the tragedy of the day was still too recent and too deeply in his thoughts. And suddenly, as he lived over again the past few weeks, it dawned upon him that he had been quite mad, and not he alone, but all these other men who had sat and talked and laughed their futile laughter while the narrow ribbon of the tape spelled ruin for them before their very eyes. How had he dared, he wondered--how did any of them dare--to speculate in stocks? What did they know of real conditions throughout the world? In the papers they read bits of news, already stale and cold, and this news they swallowed and assimilated until at last they mistook its effect upon their minds for the process of original thought. So it had been with him. Over and over again, for days, he had read, first in one form, then in another, the news that Steel was going up; until he had ended by believing it with a fervor that nothing could shake; imagining, moreover, that he had shrewdly reasoned this out for himself, that he was a good judge of commerce, finance, trade--that because of his ability he could make a fortune in stocks--he laughed ironically; disillusionment had been absolute, complete, a hammer stroke--"The Boy Gambler," he murmured to himself, "A Story of Punctured Pride."

Twilight deepened; the night breeze, grateful and refreshing, swept across the water, and all at once Atherton remembered that he had not eaten since his ill-omened luncheon and that he was ravenously hungry. "It's lucky," he reflected, "that I've enough left for a meal," and forthwith made his way toward the Sign of the Peacock, a café where he knew that evening dress was not required, and where food, wines and music vied each with the other in excellence.

The head waiter greeted him with his customary smiling welcome. "All alone to-night, Mr. Atherton?" he inquired; and Atherton, answering mechanically, "Yes, for one, please," was shown to a table near the window, but no sooner had he seated himself than Henri, the second in command, came bustling up to him. "Ze zhentlemen," he explained, "across ze room--zey ask ze honnaire--" and he waved his hand with a gesture deprecatory but inviting.

Atherton glanced in the direction indicated, and immediately recognized the two men as friends and classmates of his college days. Blagden, tall, dark, good-looking, had been one of those attractive but unreliable students who are more brilliant than successful, more admired than liked, so that on the whole his University course had been more spectacular than satisfying. But though open to plenty of criticism on other grounds, no one had ever denied him the qualities of courage, coolness and "nerve," and these had won for him outdoors the title of tennis champion, indoors the still more valuable reputation of being the best poker player in college. The other man, thickset, solid, rosy, with the neck of a bull, was "Tubby" Mills, guard upon the eleven for three seasons; never quite of "All-America" timber, but steady, dependable, and always managing to let the man opposed to him in the line realize, before the game was ended, that he had been through an afternoon of exercise perhaps more strenuous than beneficial. Stolid but likable, "Tubby"

made up in genial good nature what he perhaps lacked in brains.

Atherton rose at once, crossed the room and took the vacant chair at their table.

"Well, well," Blagden greeted him, "how goes it, old scout?" And so strong is the force of habit that Atherton, despite the day's reverses, rejoined, "Oh, first-rate, thanks. How is it with you?"

"Fine," Blagden responded, "couldn't be better. Everything lovely."

"And you, Tubby," said Atherton, turning to Mills.

"Oh, pretty good," the chubby one answered, and pushing the bill of fare toward Atherton, he added, "Here, what will you have? This is on me. Better try a porterhouse with onions; we've ordered some fizz."

Atherton followed his advice, and the talk, running back to college days and college classmates, dealt for a time wholly with the past until at last, after a pause, Blagden asked the question that Atherton had been expecting, "And what are you doing with yourself now?"

Atherton hesitated; then, inspired perhaps by the comforting influence of the steak and the "fizz," he answered impulsively, "Oh, I might as well tell you the truth. I've been playing the market, and like a fool I got in so deep that this drop to-day wiped me out. So I'm practically busted, and wondering what I'm going to do next."

Having finished his disclosure, he awaited the conventional expressions of sympathy from his friends, but to his surprise neither of them spoke, and Blagden stared at Mills, and Mills at Blagden until presently, somewhat to Atherton's resentment, both of them began to grin broadly.

"Shall we tell him, Tubby?" asked Blagden at length. "Sure thing," responded Mills briefly. "He told *us*."

Blagden turned to Atherton. "Well, then," he observed, "to borrow a phrase from the unregenerate and indefensible game of poker, this appears to be a case of three of a kind. Last week, I was long of twelve thousand bales of January cotton, and they dropped the market on me one hundred and fifty points in two days, and beggared me to the tune of about ninety thousand dollars. To-day Tubby, who has been a terrible bear on wheat, and was short up to his eyebrows, got forced out on the rise, and was stung for--how much was it, Tubby?"

"Oh, about thirty-five thousand," answered Mills regretfully, "between thirty-five and forty. I bit off more than I could chew."

In spite of himself, Atherton smiled in his turn. "Well, I'll be damned," was his first rejoinder, and then, as the real significance of the coincidence dawned upon him, he cried, "What's the trouble with this speculative game, anyway? Why on earth can't anyone beat it? We're not all fools. Suppose a hundred men start speculating on the same day? You'd naturally suppose, on some kind of law of averages, that half of them would win and half would lose. But what's the answer? The answer is that the whole darned hundred lose. I never knew it to fail. And I'd like to know why. It can't be true that everybody who invests money in cotton and grain and stocks is stark, staring crazy. There must be some men who understand conditions, who possess ability enough to calculate and plan; there must be some winners. But if they are, I never heard of 'em. It's a mighty funny game."

"You're right," Blagden assented. "I've been doing some thinking myself since last week; I've been asking the very questions you're asking now. I can't find the answer, but I've got this far; I know why poor idiots like you and me and Tubby get it in the neck. It's because we play the game single-handed. And look at what we're up against. This is an age of consolidation and co-operation. It's so in business and it's so in the markets. Pools--that's all you hear nowadays--pools in leather, copper, oil, cotton, corn. And we're fools enough, with a few thousand dollars, to go into a game where you need millions. And as for talking about understanding conditions, and calculating what the market ought to do, why good Lord, Atherton, you ought to know better than that. Speculation is only another way of spelling manipulation. Prices don't *go* up--they're forced up; they don't *go* down--they're jammed down, and sometimes most curiously far, too. But as for planning, calculating, reading, studying conditions--good night!" And he refilled his glass.

There was a thoughtful silence. Atherton, pondering on what Blagden had said, and remembering, also, what the trader at Holt and Henderson's had told him, felt that his ideas of speculation had undergone a violent change. So that at length he answered reluctantly, "Well, it looks as though you were right. But I wish we'd thought of this before. Now it's a case of 'They've got the money and we've got the experience.'"

Mills leaned forward, planting his elbows comfortably upon the table. "That's so," he agreed, "I never could see much sense in this *post mortem* business. The point is: What are we going to do next? And I for one wish it distinctly understood that I refuse to be licked. I started out to make a million dollars, and I'm not going to quit until I'm put away in a box underground. You two fellows were considered rather clever when you were in college, so instead of all this sob stuff why don't you furnish some practical wisdom? What are we going to do? How are we going to get our money back?"

Atherton gazed at his stocky friend, not without admiration for his grit. "Blagden," he answered, "has made one mighty good suggestion. Whatever we do, let's not continue this 'lone hand' business; let's take his tip that this is an age of consolidation, and let's pool our resources, such as they are, and see if we can't manage to do a little better."

Mills grunted approval. "Good scheme," he assented. "We'll be a regular trust. But when you say, 'resources, *such as they are*,' you've put your finger on our weakest spot. If we have resources, they're not in cash. What shall we call ourselves? 'The United Brotherhood of Down and Outs'? Or is that too severe?"

But Blagden, the imaginative, suddenly caught fire at the idea. "No, no," he objected, "nothing as crude as that. Give a dog a bad name and hang him. I'll tell you what we'll call ourselves. 'Gentlemen Adventurers.' That has the proper ring. Every morning we'll start forth on a tour of discovery; then we'll meet and compare notes and see if we can't combine our experiences to our mutual advantage."

"That sounds fine," Mills agreed, "but what kind of adventures are we going to have?"

"Oh, Tubby, Tubby," cried Blagden. "If there's a more prosaic man in the world than you are, I'd like to see him. Why, you miss the point of the whole thing. If we knew just what was going to happen to us, every day of our lives, where would the fun be? Where would be the romance, the thrill? If you could see an adventure coming half a mile down the road, then it wouldn't *be* an adventure; it has to bump into you from right around the corner. Do you get the idea?"

"Oh, sure," retorted Mills. "At least, I get what you think is the idea. But that is the trouble with you poetical chaps; you can't understand that this is a practical world, especially the dollars and cents part of it. And if you're proposing that we leave here to-night and start looking for adventure, why we'd better raise an emergency fund at once. Because instead of finding money, we'll be losing it. I've started looking for adventure lots of times in my life, and I always bring up in one of two places--the police station or the hospital."

"Oh, I don't mean that kind of adventure," Blagden hastened to explain. "I mean the 'New Arabian Nights' sort of thing. We'll meet princesses and potentates and you may take my word for it that it won't be long before we're on the trail of some real money. We'll get back all we've lost and more too."

He spoke persuasively, but Mills remained unconvinced. "Oh, it's easy enough," he objected, "to talk like that in here, with the lights and the music and a couple of glasses of champagne under your belt. But nothing will really happen. We'll go out of this place and walk peacefully home again, and in the morning we'll wake up and laugh at ourselves. I only wish your dreams would come true, Blagden, but they won't; they're all moonshine. The only real thing is that we're broke."

But Blagden, always at his best under fire, rallied vigorously to the support of his theory. "Nonsense," he cried, "you ought to be ashamed of yourself. One minute you claim to be a fighter and the next you're ready to quit cold. Why, the trouble with you--the trouble with all three of us--and the reason we think there's no romance left in the world is simply that we've gone stale--stale from sitting over the ticker day after day, without a thought of anything else on earth except the ups and downs of the market. I would gamble my last cent that there's waiting for us, right here in this city, adventure enough to fill a thousand books; adventures of riches and of poverty, of romance and reality, of battle and murder and sudden death. Here's the test. What day is this? Tuesday. Friday night, at nine o'clock, we'll meet in my rooms and compare notes. We'll all three try our best in the meantime and if by Friday no one of us has had an adventure worthy of the name, no one of us has chanced on the slightest idea, the faintest clue, that spells money, then I'll admit that I'm wrong and that Tubby's right. Now then, you fat guzzler, isn't that fair?"

"Oh, sure, that's fair enough," Mills was forced to agree, "but I don't believe--"

He stopped abruptly, gazing straight before him, and then, under his breath, he murmured, "Great Heavens, what a peach!"

The girl who had entered the café and taken a seat at a table not far from their own surely merited his praise. She was tall and slender, faultlessly gowned in black, and her face, under the broad picture hat, was of exceptional beauty, yet with an expression of mingled indifference and assurance that bespoke a plentiful knowledge of the world. She gave her order, began leisurely to remove her gloves, and presently, as she glanced about the room, Atherton perceived, to his surprise, that her eyes remained fixed upon their table with a singular intentness. Nor was he the only one to notice this, for immediately Mills observed, "By Jove, one of us seems to have made a hit. Do you know her, Atherton?"

Atherton shook his head. "No, I haven't the pleasure," he answered. And as the girl's eyes were suddenly averted, he added, "There was something, though, about our table, that seemed to attract her. And reasoning by the process of elimination, I conclude that it must be Blagden."

"You flatter me," Blagden calmly rejoined. "Just my luck, though, to be seated with my back to the lady. Is she really so charming?"

"Charming?" Mills echoed fervently, in a tone which answered Blagden's question in ardent affirmative. And

Atherton supplemented, "Yes, if anybody happens to fancy that particular type, I should almost say that she is as pretty a woman as I ever saw in my life."

"Why, this is wonderful!" cried Blagden. "This calls for personal investigation. I don't suppose I can deliberately turn around and stare, but we might as well be going, anyway, and I must see her, if only as we depart."

They rose, and as they started to leave the table, Atherton noticed that the girl's eyes were again turned in their direction, and almost simultaneously was aware of a smothered ejaculation from Blagden. "So you know her?" he whispered.

Blagden did not answer directly. "Just a moment," he muttered, "I'll be right back." And walking swiftly over to the table, he exchanged a few brief words with its occupant, and then rejoined his companions, his face eager and expectant.

"I'll see you fellows later," he hurriedly explained; adding hastily, "What do you think of my theories now. Didn't I tell you this was the city of adventures. And mine is going to begin right here."

Mills grinned. "You always were a lucky devil," he cried enviously. "Well, all I can say is that if this is the form our adventures are going to take, they can't come too fast for me." And he and Atherton walked slowly in the direction of the door, while Blagden turned and made his way toward the girl who awaited him.

CHAPTER VII

The Adventure of Blagden

"It was two years ago," began Blagden, "on the beach at Trouville. I shall never forget it. The sea and the sky were blue; the sands were silver; and you were a marvelous mermaid, in gold and crimson, basking on the shore. When I saw you, I felt such emotion that I began at once repeating whole stanzas of Swinburne, appropriate to the occasion, and rivalling the day in warmth. I hoped--"

But she interrupted him. "It is pathetic," she said, "that a memory so tenderly poetical should be so much at fault. I am grieved for myself; I thought I had made a more lasting impression."

"But my memory," he protested, "is not at fault. I remember perfectly. It was a wonderful costume, almost worthy of its wearer. It was gold, pale gold--"

"Oh, stupid man!" she cried, "we are not talking of costumes; what do they matter? We are talking of our first meeting, and that was not at Trouville at all. Trouville, although delightful, came later. Our first meeting was at the races--"

"By Jove," he ejaculated, "you're right. So it was--Deauville races. And you were in the grandstand, in the very first row--"

"That's better," she exclaimed. "Your memory is improving. I was watching the horses parade before the opening race, and was suddenly smitten with the charms of a beautiful bay named *Voyageur*. Immediately I knew that I must bet five hundred francs on *Voyageur*. The time was short--"

"And so," he smiled, "you made appealing eyes at me--"

"No, no," she contradicted, "I did not. Or if I did, I was quite justified. You had been staring at me very rudely for some time."

"That is true," he admitted. "I couldn't help myself. But in any event, we became acquainted, and I placed the money on your favorite. I recall that distinctly. And I remember thinking, 'Poor girl; poor lovely girl; she will surely lose.' And then *Voyageur*--"

She in her turn took up the tale. "Oh, wasn't it splendid?" she cried. "A furlong from home, and we thought that he was beaten, and then, like a flash, up he came, out of the ruck, past the leaders, won under wraps, with his jockey sitting still, and both of us shrieking, '*Voyageur*! *Voyageur*!' like mad."

"It was glorious," he agreed. "And after that do you remember the race for two-year-olds, and my theory that in an

untried field the odds were all against the favorites winning? I suggested that we buy a ticket on every horse in the race; you assented, and the theory proved a magnificent success. We won a thousand francs--"

"And that night," she reminded him, "flushed with victory, we played roulette. It was I who invented the system then, and unlike yours, it cost us every cent we had made, and much more besides. Do you remember that?"

"Of course I do," he answered. "It was the old story; we were winners, but didn't know when to stop. But it was worth it; those were royal days."

"And then," she continued, "came our ventures in the market. The rise in rails that made us rich; and the cotton corner that beggared us. You haven't forgotten those?"

"Forgotten them?" he echoed. "Could I forget? Ah! what times those were!"

There was a pause. At length she said musingly, "Two years ago. Two long years. And how has Fortune treated you? Bountifully, I hope."

Blagden smiled. "I was just complaining to my friends," he said, "that she had deserted me. And now--she resumes her favors."

She bowed, half in earnest, half jestingly. "You are too kind," she answered, "but seriously, I am sorry if you have not prospered."

"To be candid," Blagden admitted, "I have not. But I am not discouraged. Being a Goddess, it is her privilege to be fickle; that, I suppose, is her real fascination. But tell me how the years have gone with you. Have you lived as you planned to live?"

She regarded him steadily, and without emotion. "Exactly," she answered, "as I planned."

He was silent, returning her gaze. "Well," he rejoined at length, "if it is a matter for congratulation, then I congratulate you. Is he rich?"

"Oh, very," she responded. "You need hardly have asked me that?"

"Quite true," he answered. "Forgive my stupidity. And are you happy?"

"Why--yes," she replied more doubtfully, "I suppose so. I have a great deal. I desire more."

"That," he said, "is the chief trouble with all of us. That, in fact, was the reason for my recent undoing. I risked a moderate capital to gain a fortune, and was wiped out. I lost everything--hook, line and sinker."

"I am so sorry," she answered. "Was it in stocks?"

"Next door to it," he responded. "It was January cotton. By every test in the world, by reasoning, by statistical information, by the opinion of the trade, by the advice of brokers, by every known method of determining values, January cotton was the greatest purchase in the universe. It had to go up, that was all there was to it. It was mathematically impossible for it to stay down. So I bought it, bought it up to my eyebrows; and so, I imagine, did every Tom, Dick and Harry in the Street. Result, a hundred and fifty point drop, swift and sudden as a hurricane, and when it was over, scattered heaps of financial corpses, of which I had the honor to be one. I had money, desired more; and got--what I deserved."

She sighed sympathetically. "I only wish," she murmured, more to herself than to him, "that I had known."

He regarded her with frank amazement. "What could you have done?" he queried. "Prevented me from losing?"

"Yes," she answered gravely, "I think that I could. I, of course, know nothing, but it happens that my friend is a great authority upon the markets. He is never wrong."

Blagden smiled indulgently. "Oh, I've heard of those fellows," he responded. "Don't think I'm rude, but there's no such thing in the world as a man who's never wrong on speculation. He simply doesn't exist."

"But you don't understand," she insisted. "He *really* knows."

"Pure coincidence," he retorted lightly. "I've known of such cases. He might hit it three times, four times, a dozen times, but nobody can be consistently right. It's humanly impossible."

"It was over six months ago," she rejoined with conviction, "that he told me to make my first trade. At my cottage he has had installed tickers for all three of the markets. If he is there between ten and three, he keeps close watch of them. And every so often he will say, 'Would you like some pin money?' And always I win, and never lose."

"Well," said Blagden lightly, "we won't quarrel over it. If you say it's so, it's so. But why do you say that you 'desire more?' I should consider you a very fortunate lady. If I could win every time I gambled, I don't think I'd require anything else."

"Oh, yes, you would," she promptly answered. "If you were only allowed to play every week or two, and in a very limited way, and under the direction of another person, would that satisfy you? Of course not. The point is here. I am only allowed to meddle with stocks as an amusement--a plaything. But I want to know how he does it. Then I should be satisfied, for I could make all the money I wished."

"But why so eager about money?" he queried. "You never used to be."

"In two years," she answered, "I have changed a great deal. I am older; I hope wiser. I know that youth fades, that life itself is brief. And before I die, I wish to realize a dream--a vision. I wish to have the finest pleasure yacht in the world and to voyage north, south, east, west, until I have seen all that there is to see upon this earth. Hence my desire for money."

"Now I understand," he replied. Then added, more lightly, "You say you 'want to know how he does it.' Does it appear to be a kind of magic? Does he make his profits in the same way that a conjuror extracts rabbits from a hat?"

His levity nettled her. "You are provincial," she retorted sharply. "You reason that because you have lost money in stocks, everyone must do so. Often it is foolish to believe too much; but sometimes one may believe too little."

He hastened to make amends. "I apologize," he said. "You are perfectly right. And I am really immensely interested in your story. You think, then, that he speculates with some sort of system?"

"I am sure of it," she answered with conviction, "and when I saw you here to-night, I suddenly remembered many things that you had told me about the market, and I wondered if you could not aid me now."

"If I may help," he assured her, "I am wholly at your service. Though I fear I am somewhat at a loss as to how or where to begin."

"And yet," she rejoined, "there is a starting-point. I am confident of it. Are you at liberty this evening?"

"Never more so," he answered.

"Then come with me," she said. "I have a taxi waiting." And Blagden, assisting her to put on her wraps, escorted her to the motor, which whirled them away from the city, mile after mile, until it finally stopped at a pretty cottage, far out in the country, isolated and half hidden in a miniature forest of trees, shrubs and flowers.

A trim maid answered her mistress's ring, then discreetly vanished. "Now," she said, "I will show you what I mean," and leading the way to the study on the floor above, she turned the switch and flooded the room with mellow light. Blagden looked about him with interest. As she had told him, over against the wall stood the three tickers, side by side, and beyond them a desk and a telephone switchboard. In spite of himself, Blagden was impressed. There was an orderliness, an indefinable businesslike touch to the room and its contents which seemed to make it evident that its owner was a man of affairs.

"Well," she queried, "do you believe me now?"

"Oh, it's not a question of belief--" he began, but she suddenly exclaimed, "Wait a moment; I forgot," and hurriedly leaving the room, she returned almost instantly with a small memorandum book in her hand. "Now," she said, "look at this."

Blagden took the book and scanned the entries with care. Here was fifty Reading bought at ninety-three and sold at ninety-eight; and here one hundred bales of May cotton sold at eighteen, fifty-six, and bought in at seventeen, fifty-two. A little further on were ten thousand bushels of December wheat bought at a dollar, fifty-four and closed out at a dollar, fifty-seven. Sometimes the gains were large, sometimes small, but invariably, as she had claimed, each transaction showed a profit. Blagden gazed, fascinated.

"Now," she said, "isn't it wonderful?"

"Wonderful," he echoed. "It's more than that. It's a miracle. If I had met you six months ago, where would I be to-day? I'd be rolling in it; I'd be worth a million."

Her face was as covetous as his. "You've been in the market for years," she said. "Haven't you any way of finding out?"

"I don't know," he answered slowly. "Did you tell me in the café you had a clew?"

She hesitated. "It sounds rather ridiculous," she answered, "but do you think it's possible that the time of day can

have anything to do with the strength or weakness of stocks?"

He looked disappointed. "Oh, I've heard that talk down town," he responded. "There are as many theories of speculation as there are speculators. Everyone agrees that there's manipulation--flagrant manipulation--though of course this is indignantly denied by everybody connected with the Exchange. But how this manipulation is managed, no two men agree. I've heard what you hint at, that the future course of stocks is determined by their artificial strength or weakness at certain hours of the day; two o'clock, some people think is the significant time. Personally I never believed in it at all. Why do you ask?"

"Because," she answered, "when he stands here by the tickers, he is continually looking at his watch. I am not supposed to know this; in fact, between ten and three I am excluded from this room; but I have devised means of watching, and that is the peculiarity I have noticed; that, and the jotting down in his notebook of memoranda which he apparently copies from the tape."

Blagden looked puzzled. "I should be very slow," he said, "to believe anything of the kind. And I should think you could manage this affair without my aid. Considering your relations with this man, considering your very obvious attractions, I should think the stage was all set for a modern version of Merlin and Vivien."

She smiled a trifle bitterly. "I will confess to you," she answered, "that the same thing occurred to me. In fact, I attempted it; and failed utterly. Compared with this--" she indicated the tickers--"I am the proverbial dust beneath his feet."

There was silence. At length Blagden spoke. "This fascinates me," he said. "At first, I wholly disbelieved your story; now I do believe it. And upon one condition, I will devote my time, my energy, my best endeavor to the solving of this mystery. But the condition is important."

She regarded him curiously. "Name it," she said.

He rose from his seat, and stood looking at her appraisingly, a cold flame gleaming in his eyes. "It is this," he answered. "You liked me, I think, in the old days, but I was a poor man. I am a poor man to-day. But if we fathom this secret and gain the keys to Paradise, then let us make the building of your yacht a joint enterprise, and let us make the cruise--together."

She too had risen and now stood looking at him with a faint smile upon her lips. "Ours," she responded, "is a quite exceptional friendship. You are a man and I am a woman, and yet we have the great advantage of thoroughly understanding one another. If you can grant me my desire, I will reciprocate. I accept your offer, and I wish you success."

CHAPTER VIII

The Adventure of Tubby Mills

At the street entrance to the café, Mills and Atherton came momentarily to a halt. "Well," observed the stout one, "we've got to hand it to Blagden. He's what you might describe as the original Tabasco. Yet it's no credit to him that he finds adventures; they just naturally come his way. He couldn't dodge 'em if he tried. See what's happened to him now; do you suppose either of us is going to run into anything like that?"

Atherton, still under the spell of Blagden's eloquence, was gazing forth upon the crowded thoroughfare, with its hurrying throngs of pedestrians, and its multitude of motors, passing and repassing incessantly under the glare and brilliance of the bright white lights.

"I think," he slowly answered, "that anything is possible. Blagden is right. Ninety-nine men out of a hundred live and die in a rut. It has to be so; that is life. But if the hundredth man is so situated that he may range the world at will, with eyes open and every sense alert, I believe, with Blagden, that he will find adventure awaiting him at every turn in the road. It's tremendously exhilarating. Here we take leave of each other; you go one way, I go the other, and what we may discover we haven't the shadow of an idea. I think we ought to thank Blagden for waking us up. I haven't felt so keen about living since I can remember."

"Blagden," said Mills, "is a queerer combination than most of us. He's an artistic sort of chap, with all the merits and defects of the artistic temperament. He always makes me think of an airship with its steering gear shot away; he goes

like the very deuce, but you can't tell what his destination is, or at what moment a gust of wind may veer him from his course. Prince or pauper; he may become either; but he'll never be one of your commonplace mediocrities."

"You're right," Atherton agreed, "and to-night, at least, I envy him, though I imagine that in the end your plodder is perhaps the happier man of the two. He may get less out of life, but he risks less. Thrills and ills are apt to go together."

His companion laughed. "Well, we've got to risk it," he answered. "We're committed now to a life of adventure, whether we like it or not. I'm going to vary your phrase. 'Thrills for Mills' is going to be my motto. And we must make a start, Atherton; our time is short. Good-night and good luck; we'll see each other Friday."

He raised his hand in farewell, and started leisurely down the street. People by tens and hundreds and thousands surrounded him, enveloped him on every hand, yet of all the multitude he seemed to be the only wayfarer who was not hurried, preoccupied, intent upon his own individual affairs. "This," he concluded, "is too much like the middle of the stream; what I want is some quiet backwater, where there's a chance to pause and breathe."

Leaving the main street, he walked east for several blocks, and turning again parallel to his original course, found himself in one of the poorer residential districts of the city. As he had divined, here there was incident to be encountered, but of too sordid a nature to bear the remotest resemblance to genuine adventure. Old men, ragged, unkempt, muttered requests for a night's lodging, for food, or more openly for the price of a drink. Younger men, of sinister exterior, eyed him as he passed and noting his bulk, allowed him to go on his way unmolested. Women of the street, in gaudy finery, their white faces daubed with scarlet in ghastly mockery of health and beauty, ogled him leeringly, and Mills, sophisticated city dweller though he was, felt his heart sicken at the thought of their venal trade. "If there was some attraction," he thought, "some seduction, that would be one thing. But these wrecks--these walking corpses--it's horrible."

By this time, he had traversed several blocks, and the chances of adventure seemed each moment to be growing slimmer. "I'll go home," he reflected, "and go to bed. And in the morning I'll make a round of the brokers' offices; perhaps I'll be able to pick up news of something really good." And having thus allowed his mind to return to the subject of the market, he began to dream, like all defeated gamblers, of some wonderful way of "getting square with the game." "Cotton," he mused. "A man could make money in cotton. I got in too deep; that was all. If a fellow would only stick to small lots, and regular rules--"

A touch upon his arm aroused him, and he wheeled to confront a girl of a very different type from those whose demeanor had so disgusted him. She was evidently of the working class, but she had the instinctive good taste to dress according to her station, leaving to others the garish footgear, the semi-nudities of costume, and the overpowering stench of cheap perfume. And thus, in comparison with her companions upon the street, she looked so refreshingly youthful and ingenuous, and her big eyes were so appealingly pathetic that Mills, for the first time, began to feel that an adventure, even in this locality, might be both possible and enjoyable.

"I ask your pardon," she said, "for speaking to you, but I am in great trouble, and I thought that perhaps you would be willing to help me."

Mills, still only half aroused from his meditations, stared at her uncomprehendingly, and as he did so was struck afresh by the girl's air of innocence. Her eyes still gazed trustfully into his, her hold upon his arm was not relaxed, and as a result Mills presently found himself replying guardedly, "Why, I might. What's wrong?"

She gave a sigh of relief. "Oh, you are so good," she cried. "I was sure of it when I saw you. And I need someone to help me so badly. Only--" she added shyly, "let's not stand here. It's so conspicuous, and this is a horrid neighborhood; people are always talking. Just come with me; it's only a step--"

Mills hesitated. Perhaps, if he had taken a little less wine, he might have been more suspicious; possibly, if she had not slipped her arm confidingly through his, he might have been less avid of adventure; but as it was, he yielded, and as they walked along she lost no time in acquainting him with the story. It was not she herself, it appeared, who was in trouble, but a friend of hers named Rose, who was only eighteen years old and as beautiful as a picture. Rose, it appeared, had been sought by a policeman on the beat, but being as virtuous as she was pretty, she had indignantly rejected the overtures of this immoral man. Whereupon he had threatened to "get" her, and promptly made good his threat by employing a skillful shoplifter to "plant" some articles of jewelry upon the person of the persecuted Rose. She had been arrested; her case was coming up for trial to-morrow; and alone in the world, she did not know, in her predicament, where to turn for aid. Thus her friend had been prompted to go forth and look for help, and had been attracted by the prepossessing exterior of Mills. "I knew you looked good, the moment I saw you," she repeated, and as she uttered the words, her voice was tremulous either with grief or with some other emotion. Mills was frankly puzzled. The tale struck him as extremely wild and improbable, but on the other hand he was enjoying the society of his guide, and the opportunity of seeing the lovely Rose strongly appealed to him. Just how this meeting was to benefit the Order of Gentlemen Adventurers was perhaps not quite clear, but Mills' mind was not, by this time, working along the lines of strict logic; emotion, rather than pure reason, was in the ascendant. And in any event, he would have had little time to ponder the matter, for the walk, as his guide had promised, was a short one, and he presently found himself following her into a tenement of rather dubious exterior, and up countless flights of stairs whose atmosphere wholly

failed to appeal to Mills' somewhat fastidious nostrils. More than once, during the climb, strong suspicion assailed him, and his better judgment counselled flight, but the fear of being a "quitter" restrained him, and he continued his ascent until presently he surmounted the final flight, and found himself in a room somewhat barely furnished, but with an air of comfort and refinement which renewed his confidence in his guide.

She laid aside her hat and coat, and as she turned toward him, he observed with pleasure that she was really exceedingly pretty. "Rose will be here right away," she observed; then, listening for a moment, she added, "There she is now," and Mills, listening in his turn, could hear a light footfall ascending the stair. But in another instant his companion's face turned white. "My God!" she cried, "it's my husband. I thought he was out of town. What on earth shall I do? He mustn't find you here."

Mills gave her one searching glance, muttered grimly to himself, "Well, I'll be damned," and making no effort to escape, sat motionless in his chair, his eyes fixed upon the door, which opened the next moment to admit a small, sinister looking man, who gazed at the couple before him in a manner forbidding and malevolent. Nor were his first words reassuring. "What the hell is this?" he cried, and advancing toward Mills, he demanded truculently, "What the devil are you doing here?"

The girl sprang forward. "Don't hurt him!" she cried. "It's my fault. I oughtn't to have listened to him. But he wanted to come. He said he'd pay me well--"

Her words acted as an infuriant upon this slender but dangerous looking man. "I'll teach you swells--" he hissed, and like a flash he whipped a pistol from his pocket and levelled it at the head of the unfortunate Mills.

For an instant the victim gazed stolidly at the menacing circle of steel; then, with an air of complete detachment from his surroundings, he made an equivocal and wholly unlooked-for rejoinder. "Got a cigarette?" he asked.

The outraged husband glared. From past experience on many such occasions he was quite prepared for men who grovelled and begged for mercy, and once in a great while he had learned to look for a man who showed fight, but a retort like this was distinctly a novelty. And since the question scarcely admitted of a direct reply, he responded with a snarl, "Now don't get gay, young feller, don't get gay."

Mills turned to the girl. "I call that tough," he observed conversationally. "Here I want to register courage, and the only real way to do it is to light a cigarette. I love to see 'em do it on the stage, and now when I have a chance myself, all I can do is just say I'm not scared. But it's not the same thing; it ruins the effect."

The girl eyed him keenly, her face noncommittal, expressionless. The man continued to glare. Mills did not look like a lunatic, and the girl, as a rule, managed to "pick them" to perfection. Yet this time it appeared as though she had made a mistake, and while he hesitated, uncertain as to his next move, Mills obligingly relieved his embarrassment by continuing, "What you want, of course, is to get money out of me or else to damage my reputation. But unfortunately for you, I have neither reputation nor money. As far as reputation goes, I'm a small town guy, unknown in New York, and as for money, I've been playing the wheat market, and if you're looking for my coin, why, as the funny man says, 'I'll help you look.' I'm sorry to be such a disappointment--" he turned once more to the girl--"but this is the time you got the wrong pig by the ear."

The pseudo husband stared fixedly at Mills as if trying to make up his mind as to the truth of his story; then evidenced his belief by abruptly returning his pistol to his pocket, and to relieve his feelings began to vent his indignation upon the girl. "By Gad, you're clever," he exclaimed, and since he did not possess a large vocabulary and depended principally upon repetition for his effects, he added, after a momentary pause, "You're clever, by Gad."

The girl's brow darkened. Evidently she did not take kindly to criticism, and casting about for some means of defence, she jerked her head in Tubby's direction. "Well," she countered, "look at him."

Her four words worked wonders, for Mills, quick to perceive their point, first grinned, then laughed, and finally, partly as a relief for overstrained nerves, partly because the true humor of the whole affair now suddenly dawned upon him, fairly shook with merriment, while the girl, watching him, forgot her resentment and relaxed, until finally she too joined in his mirth, and even her saturnine companion permitted himself the luxury of a grin.

"But see here," cried Mills at last, "I'm not stuck on my looks, or my shape, but the old badger game--why that's positively an insult. Why didn't you sell me a gold brick and be done with it? You must have thought I was a cinch."

"I did," she retorted, "but don't you care, Fatty, you're all right. The joke's on me; I'm sorry I tackled you."

"Well, it's on me, too," he admitted. "You did a good job. Let's call it square, all around."

The man with the pistol had come forward as they talked, and now stood directly in front of Mills, regarding him with a fixed and searching gaze. "Just one minute, now," he cautioned. "A square answer to a square question. There's no double cross to this? You're not going to leak to the bulls?"

"Not much," Mills answered. "Live and let live. I've no kick coming."

Apparently the man was content. "Then see here," he continued, "if you're busted, I can find you a job. My name is Stoat. This old badger stuff isn't my regular line; in my day I was called the best second-story man in New York, and I could turn a good trick now if I needed to. But there's safer games than that; I've had a fake promoting scheme under my hat for a long time, and with your front we could make a killing. With a few little changes you'd be the honest miner to the life you and I and the kid here could work the thing to a frazzle. What do you say?"

Mills hesitated. The change from full pockets to empty ones had wrought a distinct alteration in his moral code. Yet partnership with Stoat was not an attractive prospect. "I don't believe," he temporized, "I'm the man you want. I never mixed up in anything like that."

Stoat yawned audibly. "Well, it's late," he said, "and I'm most cursedly sleepy. I was sitting into a game all last night, and I've got to get to bed. Think this thing over, and if you want to give it a go, drop around to-morrow sometime. You'll be making no mistake; it's safe as can be, and there's big money in it, too."

Mills got up and started for the door. "All right," he agreed, "I'll think it over. Much obliged for the offer." And to the girl he added, "Good night. When you see Rose, remember me to her."

She laughed. "Say," she answered, "you fell for that easy, like all the rest of 'em. It's a shame to do it. But you're a pretty good guy. You come around to-morrow and we'll talk business."

Once more upon the street, Mills gazed around him with fresh appreciation. How near he had been to death he could not guess; his knees felt as they used to at the finish of a three-mile run. To the lights, the noises, the people on the street, he warmed with a new affection. "I'm mighty glad," he muttered, "that I'm still in the picture." And more pensively than was his wont, he turned his steps toward home.

CHAPTER IX

A Message from the Past

Bellingham for the twentieth time consulted his watch, and finding that it still lacked ten minutes of midnight, he rose, walked over to the window, and stood looking out into the night. In the distance he could see the bulk of the stables looming through the darkness, and near at hand the huge lone pine tree towered in silhouette against the sky; yet his mind was not fixed upon what was before him, but was reviewing once again the events of the day, events which had occurred scarcely twelve hours ago, but which seemed, in retrospect, to have taken place ages since, in the shadow of some dim and distant past.

He could see himself, a distinct and separate entity, leaving the car and hurrying toward the garage, alert, expectant, eager to find Nolan and hear what he had to say. From the same man whom he had seen before he had sought to discover if Nolan was in, and the man had nodded with a curt "Yep," but when Bellingham was half way to the elevator his informant had called him back to explain, "Say, hold on a minute; I forgot; Nolan's quit his job."

The secretary could feel again the sinking of the heart, the shock of disappointment the words had caused. "Quit?" he had repeated, and the man had replied, "Yep. He's quit. New man on the car; a Swede. He's up there if you want to see him." But Bellingham had muttered something about its being a personal matter, and still in a daze, had made his way out of the garage, perplexed and disheartened, and vainly wondering what could possibly have happened to the chauffeur.

It was not an easy problem to solve. Certainly the money he had advanced could have been no temptation to Nolan; twenty dollars was nothing compared with the keeping of a good position. And if the chauffeur's abandonment of his job had not been voluntary, of necessity it must have been involuntary; it appeared as though he must have been detected in his pursuit of his employer, and met with a summary dismissal. Yet if this were so, why could he not still have kept his appointment with the secretary. There seemed to be no satisfactory solution, yet as a practical matter none was necessary; of what importance were theories when he knew that the actual result was a complete failure of his plans to gain information through the instrumentality of Nolan. And as a result he would now be forced to act himself; no choice was left to him; whether he liked it or not, he must assume the risk.

Thus, throughout the remainder of the day, he had laid his plans, and now was decided as to his course. But the hour for action had not yet arrived; two o'clock in the morning was the time he had chosen; and thus he lighted his spirit

lamp, made and drank two cups of coffee, and then, setting and muffling his alarm clock, he lay down, fully clothed, upon the bed, to gain a little rest before setting out upon his tour of exploration. But before many moments passed, he realized that the setting of the clock was a needless precaution; the strain he was under added to the stimulant he had taken made sleep an impossibility. And curiously enough his brain, which should have been intent upon the adventure before him, now cast back through the years, and as he lay there he could see, projected against the curtain of the dark, pictures long since forgotten, detached and yet connected, leading with merciless precision to the miserable predicament of his latter days.

Behind the house lay a broad expanse of meadow, gay with flowers and traversed by a brook which had its source in the hills adjoining the farm. Hither, in his boyhood, he made an almost daily pilgrimage, but not to gather the violets and the buttercups which lined its banks, or to hunt for blackbirds' nests in the swamp below. The attraction for him had been altogether different. With his jack-knife he would fashion boats from shingles, imagine them in his mind to be racing yachts, under clouds of sail, and starting them, with scrupulous fairness, amid the ripples of the stream, he would run headlong down the field, just able to keep pace with the current, and watching with breathless interest the outcome of the contest, as the tiny craft swept around promontories, skirted the shallows, and finally crossed the finish line, to be rescued with a forked stick, and carried back up the meadow to race and race again. How had he come to play this game? No one, as far as he could remember, had taught it to him; he had been only six or seven at the time, but the memory persisted, the thrill of the struggle, the eager brook and the no less eager boy--

The scene shifted. Some one had given him a game of "steeplechase," and a new world was born. As clearly as if it had lain on the bed beside him, he could see the oval of the board, the horses, bay, black, white and gray, and he himself, cheeks flushed, heart throbbing, sitting entranced hour after hour, casting the dice, and watching and recording the result of every race. Later had come his college days, with the thrill of real racing; the Futurity, the Suburban, the scramble of dainty thoroughbreds with the bright silks of their jockeys gleaming in the sun. But before this he could dimly recall his first knowledge of the stock market, when his father, forbidden for a time to use his eyes, had asked his son to read to him the quotations in the evening paper. Bellingham could remember that he had made sorry work of it, so that his father, usually the kindest of men, had lost his temper and had soundly berated him for his stupidity. Other days, too, he could remember, of alternate exaltation and depression until the afternoon when he had come home to find his mother in tears, and his father had taken him by the shoulder and said gravely, "Hugh, you must promise me one thing. Never, so long as you live, must you have anything to do with the stock market. It has been the curse and ruin of my life. It must not ruin yours, too." Boylike, he had promised, but a dozen years later, when the lure of the Street had bewitched him, he had not regarded his promise, and with the few thousands at his command, had started to make his fortune. How he had despised the men who traded in ten-share lots; "pikers," he had called them; for it had seemed to him that to deal in hundred and two hundred share lots, on a slender margin, was evidence of true gameness and grit. But this period had not lasted long; soon the ten-share lots became a necessity, and finally an impossibility, until the fatal day when he had borrowed money on a story that was two-thirds a lie, and a week later had seen a quiet, lagging market suddenly declined with incredible rapidity, leaving him hopelessly in debt, and now at the mercy of his long-suffering creditors.

So passed the pictures before his eyes, from the boy running beside the brook to the desperate, harried man. Inheritance or not, here had been the keynote of his life--the love of a contest, a race, a struggle, the thrill of the unknown gamble, the possible chance. And in other ways he had been sane and normal; as men go, a decent sort of man. A sense of injustice surged within him. Was it fair? If a good God ruled the world, why did he implant these fierce desires in the breasts of his children? Why did he change a world of joy and beauty into a hell of discontent? Why did he--

With a start, he came to himself. How long, he wondered, had he been dreaming? The flashlight showed ten minutes of two, and silencing the alarm, he rose, and in his stocking feet crept cautiously to the door of his room and out into the hall. For good or ill, his hour had come.

The 'house was absolutely still. And suddenly, oppressed with the strain of the day, unnerved by the strangeness of his errand, he seemed to himself to be moving in some fantastic nightmare, and he was seized with a panic of fear, so that he could scarcely control his impulse to return as he had come and to abandon his reckless quest. But after an instant, he managed to conquer his quivering nerves, and concentrating all his energies upon his task, he stole down the hallway like a shadow, entered the gallery, and found himself standing before the portrait through which the banker had made his unexpected exit three days before. Copying, as well as he could recall it, the posture of his employer, he pressed with his forefinger here and there upon the canvas, but without result until he reached the hilt of the pictured sword, when almost before he realized what was taking place, the portrait, as before, swung back, and the gateway of adventure lay open before him.

A hundred times, during the day, the secretary had made his plans, and thus, without losing an instant, he entered the orifice, drew his knife from his pocket, and wedging the narrow space between the portrait and the wall so that his retreat would not be closed to him, turned to examine the staircase that lay at his feet.

It was a slender spiral of steel, apparently extending downward for an indefinite distance, and so narrow that there was scarcely an inch of superfluous space on either hand. Without hesitation, Bellingham started to descend, listening

from time to time and hearing nothing, until at length he reached the bottom and found himself in a low passageway, with a door at the end. The secretary's heart sank. "Locked," he thought to himself, but equally to his surprise and his delight, the knob turned in his hand, and he entered a small chamber, with a second door at the further end. This additional exit, however, was securely barred, and finding his progress cut off in that direction, Bellingham turned his attention to the room itself.

A first glance afforded him small encouragement. To open the massive safe was clearly impossible; the sideboard was empty; and the desk in the corner, though it appeared, at first sight, to be a promising hiding place, proved, on closer examination, to contain nothing. The secretary's heart sank. Evidently his hopes were vain; his dream of romance gave place to prosaic reality; and with a pang of keenest disappointment he stood ready to admit defeat. Yet since he had risked so much, he decided that before leaving he would make one final search, an investigation of the room so careful and minute that he would be certain that he had overlooked nothing.

Accordingly, he first approached the sideboard, hunting around, behind and under it, removing and replacing each drawer in turn. Yet his efforts were in vain, and when he next transferred his attentions to the desk and began a similar exploration there, he met with no better success until he had removed the last drawer of all, and then, for the first time since he had entered the chamber, he experienced a momentary thrill as the flashlight revealed a crumpled paper which had fallen between the back of the drawer and the rear wall of the desk. Inserting his arm, he brought it forth to find that it was torn, faded and yellow with age, with some words quite illegible and others missing altogether. Yet piecing it together as best he could, he made an attempt to decipher its contents, and the next moment, so intense was the shock, so overpowering the revulsion from despair to exaltation, that he found himself staggering backward as if from a blow, grasping at the table behind him to save himself from actual physical collapse. But the next moment, as his heart once more sent the blood coursing through his veins, he rallied, and without losing a second he returned the drawer to its place, glanced hastily around to make sure that he had left no traces of his visit, and then made his way as quickly as possible up the staircase, through the opening in the wall, and once more regaining his room, he locked the door, lit his reading lamp, and began a systematic study of his prize.

It took only a few moments to make him realize that the task of deciphering the document was to be one of almost insuperable difficulty, but at the same time it became increasingly evident that he had made a discovery the importance of which could scarcely be exaggerated. The paper was a plain sheet of foolscap, apparently a rough draft of a final copy,--torn into eight pieces, of which to Bellingham's chagrin it now appeared that two--the lower rectangle on the right and the third from the top on the left--were missing. In the upper right-hand corner of the paper was the date, January 1, 1882, and beneath, in the middle of the sheet was a heading of which the first word was almost wholly obliterated, but the remaining four, "of the Money Gods," were comparatively clear and distinct. Under this heading were five sub-divisions, the numerals 1, 2, 3, and 5 showing plainly at the left, while the missing 4 would evidently have been written on the first of the two pieces which were lacking. And now, patiently and with infinite effort, straining his eyes over the dull, discolored paper and the faded ink, Bellingham succeeded in bringing out a word here and there until under the first numeral he had an actual sentence, though still with gaps where the wished-for word stubbornly resisted his search. "Most men ---- fools ----blers by nature ---- easiest way ---- to ---- in stocks."

The second sentence, for some reason or other, was much more distinctly written, and in a short time the secretary had produced, "Fundamental plan; bull market, sell ---- top; depress; bear ----ket; buy at bottom; give shorts ----."

But it was the third sentence which proved to be the most startling of all. It was very brief, containing only eight words, of which part of the first and the last four were all that the secretary could read. But they were quite sufficient to make him gasp. "Communi---- ---- signals on the tape." The letters, pregnant with meaning, stared him in the face, and made his breath come quick and fast as he threw an apprehensive glance into the darkness behind him, as though dreading the wrath and vengeance of some ghost from another world.

Almost beside himself with excitement, he toiled on. But the fourth sentence, with its missing fragment, told him little, for while the words were clear enough to the eye, they conveyed no message to his brain. On the upper line were the words, "On the watch," and directly beneath them, "for these signals," but the loss of the left hand paper, and the absolute impossibility of conjecturing what other words completed the sentence, made this portion of the message apparently valueless.

Equally tantalizing was the message under the figure five. The sentence began clearly enough, "The basis will be 1/4 3/8 1/4 if ----" and then came the blank occasioned by the second missing fragment of paper; while the sentence, resumed on the left-hand portion of the document, continued, "5/8 1/2 5/8 if down. Buying and selling ----" then once more the inevitable hiatus, and finally the three words, "on a scale." And this was the end.

The secretary sat gazing straight before him, his brain in a tumult. Coincidence well nigh incredible had led to this discovery, and now left no doubt in his mind that rumors which had been current in the Street for years, but always laughed to scorn by the whole fraternity of brokers, were true, after all. And suddenly, with irresistible conviction, facts, remarks, events, never before understood, now crowded to his mind, clear as crystal in the light of his present knowledge. Signals on the tape. More than once he had heard the story, told with bated breath under pledge of strictest secrecy. But here was proof. And for him, individually, this ancient document revealed all the glories of a new world. And thus, bending once more over the paper, Bellingham toiled until the first light of the dawn crept in at the windows,

and rising unsteadily from his desk, he saw staring at him from the mirror a worn and haggard face which he could scarcely recognize as his own.

CHAPTER X

The Adventure of Atherton

Atherton stood on the steps of the café watching Mills' departure until his friend's broad back and sturdy shoulders were swallowed up in the crowd; then, descending to the street, he strolled leisurely away in the opposite direction. But although, as he had just said to Mills, Blagden's enthusiasm had inspired him, he now concluded that it was not at this particular moment that he desired adventure, for there is a limit to human endurance, and the experiences of the day had left him exhausted both in body and mind. So that in spite of Blagden's counsel as to keeping constantly on the alert, he threaded his way through the throng absent-mindedly, his thoughts, through force of long habit, reverting instinctively to the ticker, whose sudden plunge downward had proved so ruinous to all his hopes and plans.

At length, however, as he turned aside from the main thoroughfare, he was roused from his abstraction by the sight of an automobile standing motionless at the curb, while the chauffeur cranked away manfully, but without result, and a tall, well-built man of middle age, evidently the owner of the car, stood looking on with a frown upon his brow. The whole affair was commonplace enough, and presumably Atherton would not have given it a second thought, if it had not been for the girl who stood at the man's side; but at the sight of her, her beauty and the charm of her radiant youth suddenly made him forget everything else in the world, and under the pretense of looking into a neighboring window, he lingered for the pure delight of stealing an occasional glance at her, already determined that as soon as the car took its departure he would contrive to note its number, so that he might learn its owner's name.

But a still better opportunity was to present itself, for presently there came an explosion, not from the car but from its owner. "That will do," he said crisply. "You can't run an automobile, and never could. You're discharged. Go to the garage and tell them to send for the car, and come out to-morrow for your pay and your clothes."

Without protest, and almost as if glad to escape thus easily, the chauffeur vanished around the corner, and immediately Atherton, lover and master of motors, saw the Goddess of Adventure beckoning to him alluringly. At once he stepped forward, and asked, "Beg pardon, but may I help you?"

The owner glanced at him sharply. "That depends," he retorted, "on how much you know about a car. I doubt if you could know any less than the idiot I was fool enough to hire. If you want to try, go ahead."

Without the loss of an instant Atherton began his investigations. "Spark's all right," he muttered; then, sniffing the air suspiciously, he added, "but I can smell gas; she must have sprung a leak." And inserting his hand under the carbureter, he brought it forth again, his palm dripping with gasolene. "Feed pipe," he decided, but shrewdly surmising that the owner would care more for results than for explanations, he kept his knowledge to himself, and drawing his knife from his pocket, he dropped on his knees beside the car and after a few moments' deft manipulation, rose, walked forward, and gave the crank a vigorous turn. There followed two or three spasmodic reports, after which the engine, once more receiving its normal supply of gas, settled down to work and began to whirr away in perfect and melodious rhythm. Whereupon Atherton, who by this time was beginning to find enjoyment in the situation, approached the owner of the car and touching his cap, reported, "All right, sir; she'll run now."

The owner eyed him keenly. "Good," was his brief comment; then added in a tone that was half a statement, half a query, "You're not a professional chauffeur?"

There was a moment's silence before Atherton, seized by inspiration, answered, "Well, not exactly, sir; not at present. The fact is, I'm looking for a situation."

Again the keen appraising glance, followed by question and reply.

"You're a good driver?"

"Yes, sir, I can drive a car."

"My name is Hamilton. I live near Rosecroft, about twenty miles out of town. Do you want to drive me there?"

This time Atherton did not hesitate. At once he recognized his patron's name, and became aware that here was a

genuine adventure, an opportunity not to be disregarded. And accordingly, striving to adopt a tone appropriate to his new employment, he responded respectfully, "Yes, sir, I'd be glad to."

Hamilton turned to the girl. "Jump in, Helen," he said, and to Atherton, in the manner of a man thoroughly accustomed to giving orders, "Now find the nearest telephone; ring the Central Garage and tell them that I shan't need them, after all. Do it as quick as you can, and then come back here."

He stepped into the motor, and Atherton, smiling to himself, hastened to carry out the banker's orders, and then returned to the car, eager to discover what the outcome of this adventure would be, and determined to show his passengers that he had not overstated his ability as a chauffeur.

Nor did he disappoint them, although as a matter of fact he had every opportunity for producing a favorable impression. The roads were perfect, the car behaved splendidly, and aided by occasional brief instructions from Mr. Hamilton, in a little over an hour from their departure he entered the winding driveway, experienced a momentary glimpse of wide lawns, shrubbery and stately trees, and brought the car to a halt beneath the portico. Immediately the door opened, and a dark, dapper-looking little man in livery came down the steps to meet them, alertly enough, yet as it seemed to Atherton with the air of one a trifle unaccustomed to his surroundings. And that this impression was correct became evident when Mr. Hamilton, alighting, looked at the servant in some surprise and then as if suddenly recollecting said, "Oh yes, you're the new second man. Where is Martin?"

"Martin, sir," the man answered, "has retired. Shall I tell him that you are here?"

"No, never mind," answered Mr. Hamilton. "Ask the housekeeper to get us something to eat." And turning to Atherton, he added brusquely, "You said you were looking for a situation. Do you want this one?"

The question, under the circumstances, was not wholly unexpected, and Atherton, during the drive, had had ample opportunity to make up his mind as to his answer. So that now he replied promptly, "Yes, sir. Very much indeed, sir."

"Satisfactory references?" asked the banker, and Atherton, knowing a number of men upon whom he could rely, responded, "Yes, sir." Whereupon the financier, without further questioning, observed, "Very well then, you're engaged on trial." And to his daughter, "I'm going to ask Bellingham to show him to his room. By the way, what's your name?"

"Atherton, sir," answered the new chauffeur.

"Very well," said Hamilton again. "Wait here."

He disappeared within the house, but Helen Hamilton, instead of following him, remained standing on the porch, and presently, with frank approval, she remarked, "You drive a car very well indeed. Much better than the other man."

At her words, Atherton felt as if the genial warmth of his romance had suffered a sudden chill. The other *man*. He did not care for the term, for it made him realize that although he had obtained a foothold in the Hamilton family, he had gained it by means of the rear entrance instead of the front. He was a servant, Mr. Hamilton's *man*. But though at first resentful, he soon had the grace to perceive that after all his position was of his own choosing, and accordingly he answered deferentially, "I thank you, miss, very much indeed."

There followed silence, and Atherton, fearing that she would depart, was racking his brains to discover some method of prolonging the conversation, when she solved the problem for him by continuing, "I am really very glad that we met you to-night."

Immediately, Atherton felt a glow of joy, only the next instant to have his hopes again dispelled as she added, "It is an excellent chance for you. Mr. Bellingham will give you all the details, but I know that for one thing if you suit my father he always allows his chauffeurs two sets of livery free."

Atherton gazed at her, wondering if any object underlay her words. Her glance was sincerity itself; her tone seemed blandly philanthropic; yet Atherton could not make himself believe that the daughter of Marshall Hamilton would stand upon the porch of her house at midnight, discussing the terms of his employment with an unknown chauffeur. No. Even if he flattered himself unduly by the assumption, he imagined that she must have detected at least a trace of the gentleman in his demeanor, and was trying to draw him out. Yet despite his blind and adoring infatuation, he promptly decided that if this were her purpose, he would give her no satisfaction, and therefore with assumed eagerness he answered greedily, "That's very generous of him, miss. And I hope, miss, he don't object to something with a bit of life to it. A purple, miss, with a red stripe, is tasty; very rich and tasty indeed."

If she was puzzled by his reply, she did not show it, but whether at the vision of the "tasty" suit, or for some other reason, she broke forth into silvery laughter, so bewitching that the enraptured Atherton, in another moment, might have capitulated and revealed to her the secret of his identity, if the door had not opened to announce the return of Mr. Hamilton, followed by a good-looking young fellow, apparently some four or five years Atherton's senior.

"Bellingham," said the banker, "this is Atherton, who is to take Rawlings' place, temporarily at least, perhaps

permanently. I wish you would show him his room, and explain to him the customary routine. Have the car ready at half past eight."

Bellingham acknowledged the introduction with a nod, jumped into the car, and they started at once for the stables. Atherton's first impression of his new acquaintance was not particularly favorable, for the secretary was evidently preoccupied and hardly spoke until he had conducted the new chauffeur to his pleasant and comfortable room in the upper portion of the stables. But here, as he lit the light and for the first time had a fair chance to see what the new arrival looked like, a sudden change came over him, and after a somewhat prolonged scrutiny he suddenly exclaimed, "Well, I may not be in a class with the well-known Mr. Holmes, but if descriptions and family resemblances count for anything, I should say the odds were about a hundred to one that you were a cousin of Billy Atherton, Princeton, '12."

It was Atherton's turn to stare. "Right you are," he answered. "Do you know Billy?"

"More or less," responded Bellingham. "We roomed together for four years."

And suddenly Atherton remembered. "What a fool I am!" he cried. "Hugh Bellingham, of course. I never thought of it. Why, I've heard about you from Billy time and again."

They stood gazing at each other, and at precisely the same moment both of them began to grin. "I suppose," said Atherton, a trifle sheepishly, "that you're wondering about this fool chauffeur business--"

But Bellingham cut him short. "My dear fellow," he rejoined, "I'm not wondering at anything. It's none of my business what you are. And as far as that goes, you have an equal right to wonder at my job; I fear it's not a very exalted one for a college graduate to hold. But we're neither of us on the witness stand. All I can say is that I'm glad you're here, and if there's anything I can do to make you comfortable, or anything I can tell you about the household, why just fire away and ask me what you please. I'm quite at your service."

There was a sincerity in his tone that Atherton appreciated. "You're mighty good," he answered, "and there are some things I'd like to know, but first, if you don't mind, I'd like to explain my being here." And forthwith, while Bellingham seated himself on the side of the bed and listened attentively, Atherton briefly recounted his misadventures in the market, his meeting with Mills and Blagden, and his subsequent search for adventure, with its most unlooked-for ending.

When he had finished, Bellingham sat for some moments in thoughtful silence before he replied, "Atherton, we're getting pretty confidential on short acquaintance, but of course it's not as though we were absolute strangers. And I want to take a liberty, and give you a piece of advice. The man who does that is usually a fool, but you will understand me better if I follow your example, and tell you just why I am in my present position. When I was a year or so older than you are now, I made the same mistake that you have just made. I went broke in the stock market, tried for over six months to land a job, and finally found employment with Mr. Hamilton, and have been here ever since. So at all events there is a bond of sympathy between us."

"By Jove, I should say so," Atherton answered, "and I imagine, if we knew the truth, we could find a long list of fellow sufferers."

"Not a doubt of it," replied the secretary, "and that leads up to what I wish to say. If you're like me, if you're like ninety-nine men out of a hundred, you'll find that after a while you'll forget your lesson, and you'll rake and scrape to get money together to go back into the game again. And what I want to urge upon you, most earnestly, is just this: Don't do it. I'm not at liberty to tell you all I know, but I can tell you this: You can't beat the game, and to go on trying is nothing more nor less than dashing your head against a wall. It's suicide in either case."

Neither his earnestness nor his good-will could be misunderstood, and Atherton was quick to respond, "I don't doubt that you're right, and I'll surely remember what you say. But I don't think I'm going to be tempted again; I believe I know when I've had enough."

The secretary was silent. Presently he rose from his seat and nervously paced up and down the room before he finally came to a halt in front of the new chauffeur.

"Atherton," he said, "doubtless you'll think I'm crazy, but I assure you that I'm not. And you can't appreciate what a godsend it is to me to have you here. I want to ask two favors of you, and I repeat that I was never more serious in my life. Do you mind letting me tell you what they are?"

The events of the day--and night--had been so many, so varied, and so nearly akin to those of a "movie show," that Atherton had reached a point where he felt really incapable of experiencing surprise at anything. And therefore he simply responded, inelegantly but heartily, "Why, sure, fire ahead."

"Then first," said the secretary, "if at any time during your stay here you think you discover anyone in the household, from Mr. Hamilton down, trying to spy upon me, either by daylight or dark, I want you to promise that you will let me know as soon as you possibly can. Are you willing to do that?"

"Of course I am," responded Atherton. "I'm afraid I'm not worth much in the detective line, but I'll keep my eyes open, and let you know if I see anything out of the ordinary. That settles number one; what's number two?"

"This," Bellingham answered. "If I had to leave very suddenly, could you give me an address in the city where I could go and stay for a little while, in case I wanted a temporary hiding-place? I mean a house where I could be sure that I could trust the occupants; the quieter the locality, the better for me."

Atherton pulled out his memorandum book, tore out a page, and scrawled Blagden's address across it. "Here's the very place," he answered. "And if I find that you've left, I'll get in touch with Blagden at once and tell him to be on the lookout for you. The neighborhood is just what you're after; old-fashioned and peaceful."

Bellingham took the paper and thrust it into his pocket. "That's fine," he said with evident relief, "and thank you for being willing to take me seriously. Perhaps some day I can explain everything to you; I might even be able to reciprocate your kindness."

Atherton smiled. "You can reciprocate right now, if you'd like to," he responded. "I'd like to ask you just one question. Is Miss Hamilton engaged to be married, or anything like that?"

Bellingham stared; then smiled in his turn. "So that's it," he rejoined. "Well, now the chauffeur business becomes clear. And I'm glad that I may relieve your mind. No, there have been plenty of applicants, but I don't think the right one has yet appeared. I believe she is still heart whole and fancy free."

Atherton heaved a sigh of relief. "I'm glad to hear that," he answered, and unable to remain quiet, he leaped to his feet, and in his turn began to pace the room. "Bellingham!" he cried, "she is--she is--" but the words would not come, and his very silence bore witness to the fervor of his love.

Bellingham, in spite of his worries and anxieties, threw back his head and laughed aloud. "My dear fellow!" he cried, "you're certainly hard hit. But let me tell you this. I've known Miss Hamilton for three years, and I can testify that no finer girl ever lived. I wish you luck, Atherton, although I must say that just at present I should think you were laboring under quite a handicap."

At the thought of his poverty, Atherton's face fell, but the next moment he regained his confidence. "A handicap," he retorted, "makes a fellow do his best. If I hadn't lost my money, I should never have met Miss Hamilton; and by Jove, Bellingham, it's worth the price. I don't regret it."

At this reasoning, the secretary smiled, but he answered kindly, "Well, I think you deserve to succeed. But I'll leave you now, for it's late, and you must be tired."

They parted at the door, and Atherton, left alone, began slowly to disrobe, reflecting earnestly upon the events of the last twelve hours. "Some day," was his conclusion. "Some hectic day." And at the thought of his friends and the meeting in the restaurant, he added, half aloud, "I'll have to admit that Blagden is a wonder. 'Adventure' is certainly right."

CHAPTER XI

A Fresh Start

"But I shouldn't think," said Helen, "that you would be satisfied to remain a chauffeur. There's no future in it; it's only rather an easy way of earning a living."

Atherton was silent. He had risen early and thoroughly overhauled his engine, and on his appearance at the house had discovered, to his delight, that Helen had decided to accompany her father on his trip to town. They had left Mr. Hamilton at his office, and after making some purchases in the shopping district, Helen had taken her place beside him on the front seat of the car, and they had started for home.

Quite evidently, thought Atherton, feminine curiosity was still unsatisfied. She had begun, with the elaborate and obvious artifice of the sex, to talk on general subjects, gradually, however, narrowing the scope of the conversation until it had centered upon Atherton himself. But while, on the one hand, she had the advantage, by thus taking the offensive, of being able to direct the talk as she pleased, Atherton, on the other, through his inferior social position and through the necessity of managing the car, was able to present a strong defence, and contrived, by answering her queries either in

monosyllables or with evasion, to leave her as much in the dark as ever.

To this course he had steadily adhered, for while he had no real objection to telling her the true state of affairs, yet he feared that if he did so she might repeat the story to her father, and that Marshall Hamilton might regard his past with disfavor and forthwith give him his discharge. And this was the last thing Atherton desired, for with the coming of morning he had grown each moment more eager to retain his "job." In the first place, after his long sojourn in the city, his surroundings themselves delighted him. The song of birds which had awakened him, the fresh, pure air, the radiant sunlight, the soft green of the fields, all the sights and sounds of the country seemed to refresh and reinvigorate him. Then, too, there was his acquaintance with Bellingham, and a natural curiosity regarding the mystery which surrounded the secretary's actions and the strange requests which he had made. And finally there was the novelty of the whole situation; the charm of feeling himself disguised, of playing a part, put him on his mettle to do it well, and the ordeal of breakfast below stairs, with the august Martin presiding at the head of the table had kept him on the alert in his anxiety neither to overdo nor underdo the role of chauffeur. There was distinctly a spice of excitement about the whole affair; he was still young enough to enjoy it as a "lark." A pretty housemaid had made admiring eyes at him; less pleasantly, he had imagined that once or twice he had detected Jenkins, the new second man, eyeing him with concealed but deliberate scrutiny. On the whole, it seemed to him that he had acquitted himself well, and thus he still had courage, even with so charming a cross-examiner, to continue to enact the part of Atherton the self-satisfied chauffeur, and not of Atherton the gentleman in adversity. And accordingly, after thoughtful consideration of her remark, he answered perversely, "Well, miss, there's many advantages to a chauffeur's job. It's apt to be steady, and it's considered very genteel, miss; very genteel, indeed."

The girl's expression, he thought, showed disappointment at his reply, but before she could answer they swept around a turn in the winding road, and the beauty of the scene before them was sufficient to make them, for the moment, oblivious of all else. A broad blue stream of troubled water, fed by many a clear and sparkling mountain brook, rushed headlong down the valley, its whirling eddies gleaming with the silver of dashing spray and the gold of dancing sunbeams. Above the bridge which lay in their path the river was wide and comparatively shallow, but below the bridge the banks narrowed sharply; the water deepened; and a couple of hundred yards further down went roaring and booming over the falls which furnished power for the mill whose machinery hummed and whirred beside the eddies of the foam-flecked pool. And to complete the picture's charm, in the middle of the bridge a boy leaned against the railing, casting his line into the stream below, while by his side two little girls romped and played with a half-grown puppy of some nondescript breed which wriggled and leaped and whirled hither and thither, in pure delight at being alive to enjoy the wonders of such a delightful and interesting world.

To avoid all chances of injury, Atherton brought the car down to a snail's pace, and thus they crossed the bridge in safety, but as the wheels of the motor struck the road upon the further side he heard behind him a sharp and terrified yelp from the dog, followed almost simultaneously by a shrill cry of anguish from his playmates. Instantly Atherton's hand was on the brake; the car jerked jarringly to a standstill; and in another second he had leaped out and had regained the middle of the bridge.

What had happened was only too evident. The puppy, in the course of his mad gyrations, had approached too nearly the edge of the bridge, had lost his balance, fallen, and was now being swept rapidly away down stream. For the little girls, it was plain that the end of their world had come; after their first instinctive cry, they stood motionless, with parted lips, their faces white and rigid with grief and terror. There was no time for reasoning or for counting the cost; no time for anything but instant action; and with the speed of lightning Atherton stripped off his coat, poised for an infinitesimal moment, and then plunged, head foremost, into the flood. The impetus of his dive carried him under, but as he came to the surface and shook the water from his eyes he saw that his aim had been true, for the puppy was only a few feet away from him, its head just visible above the rush of the waves, as it battled valiantly, but vainly, for its life. A couple of quick strokes and Atherton had grasped it with his left hand, and thanking fortune that he could use the English side stroke, he struck out as best he could with his unencumbered arm. Nor did he save his strength, since a quick glance above and below showed him that his task would be no easy one, for the speed of the current was tremendous, and already the bridge seemed far away, and the brink of the falls loomed ominously near. Yet on the other hand the stream was narrow, and once freed from the burden of the dog, he could have reached the shore in a dozen powerful strokes. But as it was, with his left arm useless, it was hard to keep his head and shoulders clear of the water, and half blinded, he struggled on, never dreaming of releasing his hold upon the puppy, but fully conscious that at best it was going to be a case of touch and go. The seconds passed, the roar below him grew louder, and at length, taking time for one quick glance, he saw that the falls were less than fifty feet away, and that just at their brink, before the downward rush of the river began, a jagged rock jutted out from the shore into the stream. Here, then, was his chance, though but a slim one, for swimming is one of the most taxing exercises in the world, and his long hours beside the ticker had softened him and relaxed his muscles so that now, just when he needed it most, his lack of condition told upon him and began steadily to wear him down. And thus, summoning every remaining ounce of energy, he lashed through the water until as though through a mist he saw the rock come into view just below him. One stroke more and it was abreast--the boom of the falls deafened him--he choked, gasped--now his moment had come--he reached desperately for the rock, grasped it only to have his clutch torn loose--he had missed it, his chance was gone--he had lost his fight--

Down the bank flashed headlong a gleam of white; the girl's lithe form was thrown prostrate upon the rock; her arm

leaped out, her hand caught his, and she braced herself, every muscle stiffening under the strain; then slowly, inch by inch conquering the force of the current, she drew man and dog to safety, and a moment later bent over them as they lay prone upon the bank.

Atherton's eyes were closed; his breath came in quick, uneven gasps. "Are you all right?" she cried, and although he made no direct reply, he contrived a vague gesture toward the draggled ball of yellow fur at his side. "Look after--pup," he managed to articulate, and was satisfied to lie still, while the sunshine whirled dazzlingly about him, and the baffled river roared past at his feet.

But the dog needed little help. Nervous shock--if puppies are subject to nervous shocks--seemed to be all that ailed him, and presently he sat up, very moist and somewhat dazed, to greet the children who now came tearing down the bank, their grief changed suddenly to wild delight. For the little girls, the dog was all that mattered; and gathering him, all dripping as he was, into their arms, they loaded him with caresses and endearments, and without a thought of Atherton, bore him away toward home. But the boy, old enough to be a hero worshipper, lingered to gaze admiringly as Atherton at length sat up and began to wring the water from his clothes. "Say, mister," he volunteered, "you done that slick," and abashed by the sound of his own voice, hastily departed to see that the incident was adequately described at the farmhouse. And thus Helen and Atherton were left alone.

Little by little, Atherton's composure returned. The world ceased revolving; his heart beats steadied; and immediately he was admiringly conscious of the girl's courage and skill. So that presently, forgetting for the moment his efforts at disguise, he exclaimed with all sincerity, "I don't see how you did it! There's no doubt you saved my life!"

But the girl was evidently not thinking of her own share in the rescue. "If I did," she answered, "I am glad. But you were very brave. It was a great risk to take for a dog."

"Well, I always liked dogs," he pleaded in extenuation, "and he was a cunning little rascal, too. He looked so tiny and helpless down there in the water; it didn't really seem quite fair."

There was silence. For Atherton, the world had suddenly taken on new and brighter colors, for the girl's expression plainly showed her admiration for his act. And at length, summoning all his courage, he asked, "If I should ask you a truthful question, would you give me a truthful answer?"

Far down in the depths of her eyes there gleamed a sparkle of merriment, but otherwise her face was quite grave as she responded, "Of course." And with the slightest possible accent upon the pronoun, she added, "*I* am always truthful."

But he did not choose to notice the implication. "Then," he asked, "when you saw me last night, did you think I appeared to be an ordinary, everyday chauffeur, or did you notice any signs of--what shall I call it--of a gentleman in reduced circumstances?"

"As for reduced circumstances," she answered promptly, "I never gave that a thought, but as for thinking you were a gentleman, yes, that certainly occurred to me. And really, Mr. Atherton--" again, though ever so slightly, she stressed the "Mr."--"I fear that the theatre isn't your vocation. Your conception--that is the word, isn't it--your conception of the chauffeur's part is very crude indeed. It is a quite frightful combination of a stage Englishman and a vaudeville butler."

His face fell. "Now isn't that too bad!" he exclaimed ruefully, "and I thought I was doing it so well. I am terribly discouraged."

"Oh, but you needn't be," she responded. "To be an actor is a fine thing, but there are other things even better. For instance, to be a life-saver is infinitely nobler."

She spoke between jest and earnest, and Atherton, for the first time since his ducking, laughed. "Considering the size of the pup," he answered, "the title is far too grand. But I'll accept it, just the same, to save my pride. And if you don't mind, I should like to explain this business of the chauffeur," and very briefly, and without the mentioning of names, he ran over the adventures and misadventures of the preceding day. "And so," he concluded, "you can see that I've made rather a mess of things. But I wish--I'd like to--" he began to flounder helplessly, then got himself once more in hand, and went on steadily, "You'll think I'm an awful bounder for saying this, but I'll probably never have another chance, and coming so near to the edge of things as I did just now seems to make life a lot more real. I want to say just this; that I admire you tremendously, and I wish I'd had the good luck to meet you before I made ducks and drakes of all my prospects in life."

And now, having had his say, he was suddenly amazed at his own temerity, and did not dare look at her until at length, as she remained silent, he ventured to steal a glance at her face, and was relieved to discover that she did not appear to be displeased. She was gazing straight before her into the whirling eddies of the river, and presently she turned her head and answered him, and as she did so he was struck afresh by the simple charm and directness of her manner. "If you admire me," she said, "I am very glad, and I assure you it is quite mutual. I like a man to be brave, and even more, I think, I like him to be kind. And as for your misfortunes, I don't think you should regret them. You see, I know something about stocks, and the market--my father and I have always been great pals--and I'm sure the game isn't worth the candle. I'm sure that every man who possibly can should be doing some hard, honest work--work that

will somehow count--and stock gambling most emphatically doesn't count. So I believe your losses are a blessing in disguise."

He knew that she spoke the truth, and hastened to acknowledge it. "You are quite right," he admitted, "but it's sometimes hard to live down a reckless past. I should like nothing so much as a fresh start, but can I get it? I don't think it will be easy."

She meditated. "The question is," she said slowly, "what can you do best?" And with a gleam of mischief, she added, "We'll omit the stage, but all the rest of the world remains."

He smiled a trifle grimly. "I'm badly equipped, I know," he responded. "The usual college education, and that is about all. But I am a fair mechanic. Motors especially. I've always loved them, and sometimes I can make them do things that other people can't. I believe, if I could get a chance in the automobile business, I could make good."

She thought again. "I see a way," she said at length. "My father, as you perhaps know, is a man of wide interests. Among other things, he and his friends have just taken over two or three big motor companies, and are going to consolidate them. I'll arrange an interview for to-night; you can tell father your story, and perhaps he'll help you. At any rate, I'll tell him what you did this morning; that ought to show him that you have courage, and that you know how to make up your mind."

Atherton stared. There was a business-like directness about her which made him realize that she was a true daughter of Marshall Hamilton. "You're very good," he answered gratefully. "I'd like nothing better than a chance like that."

"I'm happy to help," she said, and as she rose to her feet, she added, "And now, if you've recovered, we must be going. I've a luncheon engagement that I mustn't miss."

He jumped up at once, his knees still a bit unsteady, but his heart as light as a feather, and feeling, as they made their way back toward the motor, that the falling of the dog into the water had sufficed to change the whole course of his fortunes.

That night, at eight o'clock, he was received in Marshall Hamilton's study, and for twenty minutes was subjected to a rapid fire of questions, searching but not unfriendly, and aimed with a skill that made Atherton understand and appreciate why his employer was a successful man. To the matter of his stock losses Mr. Hamilton came back more than once, but apparently he was willing to forgive this indiscretion, for at the end of their talk it was arranged that Atherton should continue as chauffeur until Monday night, and should then be given a chance in one of the factories of the new company to see whether he could reascend the ladder from which he had been so rudely displaced.

So his opportunity had come to him, and as he left the house and made his way back to the stables, bright visions of the future filled his brain, and he dreamed over and over again, as young men have dreamed since the beginning of time, dreams of youth, dreams of fame, and above all else, dreams of love.

CHAPTER XII

The Flight of Bellingham

On the narrow balcony outside his room Atherton sat alone in the darkness, looking forth upon the splendor of the night. Above him stretched the velvet blackness of the heavens, jewelled with bright and luminous stars; from the distant woodland sounded, in ceaseless iteration, the music of the whippoorwills; while from the meadows the south wind, bearing the fragrance of the fields, stirred the ivy on the stable walls and murmured nocturnal melody among the branches of the slumbering pines. Beauty everywhere, on earth and in sky; beauty, it seemed to Atherton, in perfect unison with the thoughts which filled his brain.

"Ye shall be born again." The old Biblical phrase, long forgotten, echoed and re-echoed in his mind. And in his case he knew that it was true; that the events of the last three days had altered the whole current of his being. Already the old life--the feverish hours around the ticker, the crowd of gamblers, the close, stale air of the customers' room, the glare and dazzle of the lights--all of these things seemed part and parcel of another world. Now they were gone, and gone, too, was that horrible concentration on points and fractions; quarters and eighths; to Atherton, gazing upon the calm and silent glory of the night, it seemed incredible that he could ever have lived through times like these.

Midway in his mind, between that past hell and this present heaven, lay the memory of his meeting with Blagden and with Mills. And once again, as he recalled that evening, it seemed to him impossible that he could have been a party to the compact they had made. Like a drunkard only half sobered after a debauch, he knew now that although he had not realized it he had still been under the spell of the market, a beaten gambler, yet in the grip of the lure and lust of the game. Yet his agreement caused him no real uneasiness, for though at the time Blagden's magnetism and his ready eloquence had made all that he had said seem plausible and sane, now, viewed from this distance, the idea of three young men, without money and without influence, solemnly banding together to defy the world, appeared quite childish and absurd. And yet, so far as he was concerned, he was compelled to admit that in one particular Blagden's judgment had certainly been correct; a true adventure had awaited him. How, he wondered, had Mills and Blagden fared. It was difficult to imagine Tubby in any very melodramatic role, but Blagden, after his meeting with his fair acquaintance, seemed destined inevitably to encounter some sort of romance or intrigue. And as Atherton thought of the woman at the café, with her splendid beauty so flauntingly for sale, a sudden sequence of comparisons and contrasts flashed through his mind. There was the life of the ticker, feverish, fascinating, fruitless, ringing empty and hollow when set over against the sane and wholesome life of the man who works for his livelihood. And in like manner there was this traffic and barter of illicit love, morbid, exotic, supersensual, paling to quivering shame when compared with true love, something so earthly and yet so celestial, so passionate and yet so ethereal, so bewildering and so enthralling that it would not let him sleep, but kept him here in the darkness, while the clocks struck twelve, and half-past, and one--

Among the shadows surrounding the house occurred a subtle transformation--a change half sound, half motion, and so faint and evanescent that Atherton, still partly in dreamland and only semi-conscious of the real world about him, regarded it incuriously, oblivious of its real significance. But an instant later he became thoroughly awakened as he saw one of the shadows detach itself from the rest and begin to move, cautiously and without noise, in the direction of the stable. Atherton looked on with interest. "Now who the dickens," he wondered, "can that be? And what in the world is he after? This is a cheerful hour for a man to be taking a walk for his health."

The general attitude of the figure, indeed, suggested secrecy, if not something still more sinister. Slowly and warily it advanced, but the stable was evidently not its destination, for as it passed the huge pine in front of the house it approached it, little by little, until at last the shadow of this nocturnal prowler became lost and merged in the lower branches of the tree. At once Atherton's curiosity increased. "I'd better have a look at this," he decided, and stepping into his room, he slipped his revolver into his pocket, passed quietly down the stairs and began making his way toward the tree. At the edge of its lower branches, which swept the ground, he paused to listen, and heard above him faint sounds which seemed to indicate that this midnight marauder was ascending the tree. Completely mystified, he dropped on hands and knees, and as he crawled inward, an occasional descending branch or bit of bark made it evident that his supposition was correct.

Atherton's wonderment increased. "Must be a lunatic," was his first thought, but this seemed scarcely possible. Then why, he reflected, should a person wish to climb a tree at this time of night? To signal? For what purpose, and to whom? To keep some kind of a watch, or lookout? This seemed more likely. Could the man be a burglar, with a confederate working in the house? "If I go up after him," he thought, "he'll surely hear or see me. And if I hail him when he comes down, I'll probably get into trouble right away. If he *is* a burglar, he's doubtless a good shot and a quick one, too. I think I'll play this safe." And climbing up some eight or ten feet from the ground, he found a place where two huge limbs grew close together, and working out as far as possible from the trunk of the tree, he stretched himself out at full length and waited. Occasional faint sounds reached him from above and presently the figure again descended, passing so near him that even in the darkness Atherton gained the impression that the man was of slender stature, somehow suggesting vaguely the identity of Martin's new assistant. Waiting until it seemed safe, Atherton slipped down to the ground in his turn and reached the circumference of the branches just in time to see the shadow once more disappear upon the veranda. Presumptively, then, the man was not a burglar, but an inmate of the house.

But for what purpose had he climbed the tree? "I believe," concluded Atherton, "that I'll go up myself. Must be a bully view, if nothing else."

Accordingly, he began his ascent, memories of similar climbs in boyhood coming vividly to mind as he mounted higher and higher. The first part of his journey was made in darkness so profound that there was no possible chance for observation, but when he reached a height about two-thirds of the way to the top the branches began to shorten rapidly so that presently he found that he could command a view of the stable upon one hand and of the house on the other. The stable was in total darkness, but when he turned his attention to the house he at once discovered that one window was brightly lighted and his heart quickened at the sight, for there was now at least a possible explanation of the mystery. Who's room was it, he asked himself, and although totally unfamiliar with the interior arrangement of the house, he felt that considering the secretary's story everything pointed to Bellingham as its occupant. Again he started upward, but it now became a question whether or not he could obtain a glimpse of the room, for he had reached an altitude where the trunk of the pine had decreased dangerously in size, so that every puff of wind swayed him giddily to and fro. Undoubtedly, his predecessor's lighter weight had been an advantage, but Atherton's curiosity was thoroughly aroused and setting his teeth he advanced foot by foot until at length, with one arm clasped tightly around the trunk of the pine, he had gained a height whence he could view, through the open window, the interior of the room.

As he had expected, it was Bellingham's apartment. The secretary, a green shade over his eyes, sat at his desk,

working with concentrated absorption upon the papers before him. To his right and left were scattered about the room what at first appeared to be streamers of white ribbon, but which Atherton presently recognized as the paper "tape" which supplies the tickers and upon which are recorded the daily transactions of the Exchange.

"A chart fiend," thought Atherton to himself, "working in secret, as they always do. I wonder, though, why anyone should be spying on him; he can't be harming anybody but himself. I wonder if it's possible--"

But at this point a gust of wind, unusually severe, interrupted his reflections, swinging him back and forth so dizzily that when it had subsided he was glad enough to begin his descent from his airy altitude. Once safely back upon the ground, he paused to think. His first impulse was to return to his room and wait until morning before informing Bellingham of what had occurred. But on second thought various circumstances seemed to combine to render haste imperative. For one thing, there was the manner in which the secretary had acted; for another, there was the unmistakeable earnestness of his appeal; and to lend color to his fears there was this singular nocturnal observation of his labors. Surely, no ordinary servant would have had the wish, the courage or the skill to make this dangerous ascent, and in addition to this there was the added fact that this arboreal spy was in the employ of Marshall Hamilton, one of the financial leaders of New York. All in all, the matter assumed serious proportions. But how, at this hour of the morning, was he to make his way to Bellingham's room? Doors and windows were locked; no water pipe or sturdy vine adorned the walls. "A bow and arrow," he thought to himself, "might do the trick." And although such a weapon was not available, the idea suggested another, and making his way back to the stable, he unearthed, in the loft adjoining his room, an old discarded tennis set, and abstracting three of the balls, returned to his room, slit them with a knife, and hastily penned three notes, "Man has been watching you from top of pine tree. If you leave, meet me at address given to-morrow night, eight o'clock." Then, inserting one of these, with a corner projecting, in each of his missiles, he once more retraced his steps toward the house.

If possible, he would have preferred to make his attempt from the ground, but the height of Bellingham's room made the angle so difficult that he wisely decided there would be no use in attempting this method of communication. "I might shoot away all night," he reflected, "and never hit the window at all. I'll have to take another climb." And accordingly, travelling with the added speed acquired by familiarity with his surroundings, he soon regained the top of the pine.

To his relief, the window was still open, and the secretary was still pursuing his labors with undiminished ardor. "This," thought Atherton, "is the time to 'groove' one," and taking one of the balls from his pocket, he waited for a lull in the wind, and calculating, as well as he could, the required elevation, he let fly with so good an aim that the ball struck fairly on the window ledge, bounced over and disappeared within the room.

Immediately Atherton saw the secretary start, look around him with an expression of amazement, and then rise hastily from his seat. A few moments later he reappeared at the window, gazing forth in the direction of the pine tree with every evidence of terror and consternation; then abruptly closed the window and lowered the shade. For an instant Atherton could see him moving hurriedly about the room; then the light was suddenly extinguished, Bellingham's apartment was engulfed in the black bulk of the house; and Atherton, feeling that he had done everything in his power, again descended and made his way to his room, wondering greatly what would be the outcome of the night's events.

CHAPTER XIII

The Great Secret

An unexpected trip in the motor had delayed Atherton's departure for town, and it was after nine o'clock when he ran quickly up the stairs which led to Blagden's room, confidently expecting to find Bellingham there before him. The morning had dawned, revealing no trace of the secretary, and Atherton had taken advantage of an errand in the village to telephone Blagden to be on the lookout for the fugitive in the neighborhood of eight o'clock. But now, to his disappointment, he entered the room to find Blagden and Mills alone, Blagden lying on the couch, eyes half closed, pipe in mouth, Mills sprawling in the easy chair, extracting minor chords of unspeakable melancholy from Blagden's guitar. Both were clearly bored, and glad of a chance to vent their indignation upon Atherton.

"You're an idiot of a fellow," observed Blagden. "Where's this friend of yours? We've been here since seven o'clock."

"Yes," added Mills. "Hurried our dinner, too. Worst thing in the world for a man. We thought from your telephoning that it must be important."

Atherton, weary from loss of sleep, dropped into a chair. "Well, I imagine it is important," he rejoined. "He'll be

here, I'm sure. Unless--" he added thoughtfully, "something may have happened to him. I shouldn't be greatly surprised if that was the trouble. But you fellows needn't make such a row about it. It hasn't done you any harm. We were supposed to meet to-night anyway."

Mills laid aside the guitar. "That's right," he assented, "this was to be the experience meeting. And as you are the originator of the whole thing, Blagden, you'd better begin. How did you get along with the lovely lady? Was it a real adventure?"

Blagden puffed thoughtfully at his pipe. "Yes," he at length replied, "It surely was. The lovely lady is interested in stocks and she has a--what is the technical word in such cases--friend, isn't it? Gentleman friend? Yes, that's it. She has a gentleman friend who gives her tips on the market and--" he paused dramatically--"whose tips are always right. She never loses, and *always* wins."

Both of his hearers laughed. "You mentioned the 'Arabian Nights' that evening in the café," scoffed Mills. And Atherton added, "That's just like a woman. Why did she pick out the one impossible story in the world? Anything else I'd have believed, out of compliment to her good looks. But a friend who beats the stock market. Never. That's incredible."

"Yes," Blagden admitted, "on general principles, I'd agree with you. And yet I must say that her story was most convincing. I saw the house where she lives; saw the tickers, large as life, installed by her friend; saw her very dainty little account book, with its record of six months' trading in cotton, grain and stocks, and with every transaction showing its profit--a clean slate."

There followed silence. Then Atherton asked, still unbelievingly, "But why does she confide in you? If she's got such a good thing--the tips, I mean, not the gentleman friend--why isn't she satisfied? Why does she tell *you* her troubles?"

Mills laughed. "It's his personal charm," he volunteered. "He always scores with the ladies. They'll tell him anything."

"Oh, shut up, Tubby," Blagden retorted, "this is a serious matter." And then to Atherton, "The answer is as old as the time of Bluebeard, as old as Eve and the serpent. Curiosity, that is the trouble with my charming friend. It seems that she's not satisfied merely to make money; it's the secret of making it she's after. And her benefactor won't tell it to her. He lets her play with the market as a child would play with a toy, and that's all."

"But how does she know," queried Mills, "that there is any secret? It may be nothing but luck."

"Yes, that's possible," admitted Blagden, "but according to our experience, it's very unlikely. No man's luck would hold in all three markets for six months without a break. Besides, she's intelligent enough, and she's convinced that he plays on a regular system. Her theory is that there's some kind of inside manipulation by which stocks are put up at certain hours of the day and put down at others; frequently, she says, he consults his watch before making a trade. Rather an ingenious idea."

"Humph," ejaculated Mills, "I should say it was. Sounds pretty reasonable to me. First time I ever heard of it."

"Well," demurred Blagden, "it's barely possible, but I doubt it. In fact, I don't take the whole story very seriously. And yet--it's curious. But in any event, I fear I didn't help her much. If there is a secret, it's not an easy one to solve."

He was silent. "Anything else?" asked Atherton, after a pause.

"No," Blagden answered, "that's the whole story. And now you fellows can tell your troubles. How about you, Tubby? Any adventure?"

Mills chuckled at the remembrance. "Oh, rather," he replied. "I too met a lady, only she wasn't quite in a class with yours. She was a pretty little minx, though, at that, and after she had decoyed me to her home with a most pathetic story, she and her running mate, a most villainous looking individual named Stoat, tried to hold me up with the old badger game."

"Good Lord!" cried Blagden, "That wasn't any joke, Tubby. It may be an old game, but it's as dangerous as it ever was. Weren't you scared?"

"Sure was," admitted Mills. "Couldn't have been scareder, but Nature having blessed me with a placid exterior, I managed to get by without their knowing it. And finally we wound up by becoming great pals; I never made such a hit in my life. In fact, good old Stoat, who appears to be quite a noted criminal, offered me a partnership on the spot. As near as I could make it out, he was drawn to me by my appearance of respectability. It sounds conceited of me to repeat it, but he assured me that with the proper training, I had all the qualifications for a most successful criminal."

Atherton laughed. "Some compliment," he commented dryly, but Blagden heard the news with perfect seriousness. "I believe he was right, Tubby," he cried. "If he seemed to be a pretty smooth proposition, why don't you go in with him? We might get hold of something big, and without any risk to it, either."

"Oh, thanks," retorted Mills with unwonted asperity, "why don't you try it yourself? I'll introduce you with pleasure. But none of the Jesse James stuff for me, please. Jails and electric chairs never appealed to me in the least."

Blagden grinned. "Oh, I haven't your peculiar beauty of face and form," he rejoined. "I'm sure I wouldn't suit your friend. You're missing a great chance, Tubby; you'd better reconsider."

"Not on your life," answered Mills with conviction, "but if you ever require the services of a first-class robber, second-story man and I dare say murderer, why he kindly gave me his name and address, and I shall be delighted to bring two such congenial spirits together."

"All right; I'll remember it," said Blagden. Then, turning to Atherton, he asked, "How about you? Anything doing?"

Atherton smiled. "Why," he responded apologetically, "after all this spotlight melodrama of yours and Tubby's, I'm afraid my experience will sound pretty tame. In fact, when you learn the truth, you may expel me from the United Order of Gentlemen Adventurers. It's a shameful confession, but I'm working for my living. I am--" he paused a moment properly to emphasize the announcement--"a chauffeur."

Both his hearers shouted with laughter. "Oh, fine!" cried Blagden, "that's the best yet. Go on. Give us the details. I'll bet it's a lady you're working for. Some rich old spinster, I hope. She might adopt you."

"No," Atherton answered, "no lady in this at all. But I'm working for a man you may have heard of. His name is Marshall Hamilton."

His hearers suddenly sobered. "The deuce!" cried Mills, and Blagden added, "Well, there's a chance to get some real tips on the market. Perhaps you have some already."

"No, no such luck," responded Atherton, "but I have come across something curious connected with the stock market. Mr. Hamilton has a secretary named Bellingham, a very decent chap indeed--he's the one I telephoned you about this morning. Now Bellingham, it appears, is a chart fiend, or something of that sort; he has the tape sent to him and works at it nights, puzzling out some sort of a system of his own. But the singular thing is that he's been mortally afraid of being detected; we got chummy the first night I met him, and he told me all his fears, and asked me for some safe address where he might go if he had to leave on the jump. And last night the very thing happened that he'd been dreading; some one was spying on him; I got wind of it and let him know, and advised him to come here to-night. So with the dawning of the morning, friend Bellingham had disappeared, and that is why I expect him here."

There was a moment's silence. Then Blagden cried, triumphantly, "Didn't I tell you fellows the truth? Didn't I say that we were stagnating over the tickers when there was plenty of adventure left in the world if we only had enterprise enough to go out and look for it? And just see what we've discovered in the first few days."

"Yes, that's true," agreed Atherton. "We'll give you credit for that. But don't forget that there's something else you haven't proved to us. You claimed that somehow or other we were going to be able to combine our experiences to our mutual advantage, and I can't quite see how we're going to do it. You have made the acquaintance of a lady who knows how to beat the stock market; Mills knows an expert criminal; and I am driving a car. But how is all this going to make us rich? Explain that to us, Blagden."

"Oh, well," Blagden retorted, "what do you expect? That fortunes are made over night? Of course not. Give us a chance. We'll accumulate more knowledge as we go along, and presently we'll strike a winning combination. Just consider what's happened to us already. Why, if we can keep up this gait, we'll need a card catalogue to keep track of our adventures. You're unreasonable, Atherton; we've made a start, and that's the principal thing."

As he finished speaking, the bell, as if to punctuate his words, rang sharply. Atherton leaped to his feet. "Bellingham," he cried, and strode hastily to the tube. "Who is it?" he asked, and as he had expected, the answer came back in low but hurried tones. "It's I; Bellingham. Let me in, Atherton, quick!"

Atherton pressed the button, threw open the door, and an instant later there came the sound of rapid footsteps on the stairs, and Bellingham came into the room, pausing on the threshold to close and lock the door behind him, as though fearing pursuit. The secretary's appearance had changed greatly for the worse. His face was pale; dark circles ringed his eyes, and acknowledging Atherton's introductions to the others with a nod, he sank heavily into a chair with the air of a man thoroughly exhausted and spent. Blagden eyed him keenly for a moment, then rose, walked over to the sideboard, poured some brandy into a glass, and handed it to him. Bellingham drained the glass, and almost immediately the red began to creep back into his cheeks. "Thanks," he said, "that's better," and turning to Atherton he added, "I've had an awful day. I've been shadowed; I'm sure of it. But I managed to give them the slip about an hour ago. I wanted to see you before I leave."

Atherton did not know how to interpret his words. "Before you leave?" he echoed. "Have you made up your mind to that?"

"Yes," Bellingham answered, "it's the only thing I can do. I've taken a risk. I've played for big stakes--and lost. If I

stay here, I won't live another twenty-four hours. I've booked passage for South America; the steamer sails at seven o'clock to-morrow morning; and I shan't feel easy until I've gone aboard to-night and locked my stateroom door behind me. Then I believe I have a chance. But if I do get away safely, I owe my life to you, and I wanted to see you and tell you so."

"But you shouldn't have risked it," cried Atherton. "It wasn't worth while. I don't deserve any thanks, anyway; I acted on the impulse of the moment; that was all."

Bellingham gazed at him abstractedly, as if scarcely heeding his words. "Time is short," he said, "and I've a good deal to say. We've got to think quick." Then, with a glance at Mills and Blagden, he added, "I understand that you three fellows have pooled your fortunes. What I say to one, I can say to all."

"That's correct," Atherton assented, and the secretary continued, "Then here's the story. By the merest accident, I've stumbled on a big secret, the biggest secret in the world. Financially speaking, you can't overestimate its importance. If a man can solve it, he can make all the money he wants--nothing can stop him. But if it becomes known that he has solved it, or if he is detected in the attempt, he might as well have written his own death warrant. I want to do the right thing by you fellows; if you care to have me do it, I'll tell you what I know. Or if, on the other hand, you don't feel like tempting fate, well and good; I dare say I'll only be doing you a bad turn by telling you. Take your choice; I leave it to you to decide."

Blagden, whose eyes had never left the secretary's face, was the first to speak. "We'll take a chance," he answered coolly. "Isn't that right, boys?"

"Sure thing," assented Mills, but Atherton did not immediately respond. Three days ago, he would not have hesitated, but his meeting with Helen Hamilton had made all matters connected with money assume a secondary place, and life itself, with so much to live for, now seemed a possession too precious to be risked. Yet it was difficult to take Bellingham's words seriously; he must be exaggerating. And finally curiosity turned the scale, and he answered briefly, "All right; go ahead."

Bellingham leaned forward in his chair, his eyes bright, the liquor loosening his tongue. "Then here is the story," he cried. "For years, every one has claimed that the stock market is an unbeatable game. Man after man tries it; goes into it sanguine, confident; and emerges broken in purse and spirit. Isn't that so?"

There was a murmur of assent. "And why it is so," went on Bellingham, "is a mystery. You can't say that all men are fools. They're not. Men play the stock market who have succeeded brilliantly in other lines--men who have never made a failure in their lives--but the stock market beats them as it beats any novice. I think you'll bear me out in that."

Again his hearers signified assent, and Bellingham, lowering his voice, continued, "Then what is the answer? All my life I've lived in the atmosphere of the Exchange; all my life I've heard the legends and the rumors that surround it; but never, until three days ago, have I even suspected the truth. There's no need for me to tell you how I came by this knowledge; it's enough for me to say that a paper, accidentally discovered, has so filled the gaps in what I knew before that now I can make something more than a guess at the real mystery of the Stock Exchange. And this is what I know. Forty years ago, four men--the wealthiest, ablest and shrewdest men of their day--met together and founded the most wonderful secret order in the world. This was their plan--to form and perfect an organization so powerful that by means of it they could govern the course of the stock market--could actually raise or lower prices as they chose."

Blagden, who had been listening with constantly increasing attention, now broke in, more to himself than to the others, "Just what I said. Combination; cooperation; it's the only way."

Bellingham turned to him. "Exactly!" he cried. "And what was the first requisite for their plan? Money, of course; money unlimited; not money as we understand it, in hundreds and thousands, but money in millions, in tens of millions, in billions. And that is what these four men, with their resources and connections, were able to achieve. They labored until they had ready at their command what was practically an inexhaustible reservoir of gold. That was the first step. The next was to perfect the army of men who were to carry on this financial war. At its head were seven commanders-in-chief, the four I have mentioned, and besides them one in England and two on the Continent. These were the true insiders, the sole possessors of the secret, sworn by the most solemn of oaths to guard it from all the world excepting themselves and their successors in office. They were the leaders, but under them were colonels and captains and privates in the ranks, each man of proved ability, and each with his special duty to perform. And thus, fully equipped with men and munitions, they were ready to take the field."

Mills had been gazing at him, wide-eyed, absorbed in the secretary's story. Now he could contain himself no longer. "I don't care much," he cried, "for your comparison. You keep talking about a war. I should call it a slaughter. With most of the money in the world behind you, how can you help but lick the other fellow. War! Do you talk about a war between a boa-constrictor and a rabbit?"

"You're right," assented the secretary. "Quite right. And I'll drop figures of speech altogether. When these men had everything in readiness, then began the cold-blooded, systematic despoiling of the people. For one thing, they had--and

have--the finest publicity department in the world. The heads of it know all the weaknesses of human nature, know every detail of the psychology of the so-called average man. They know how to arouse his interest in the market, how to whet his appetite for speculation, how to get him to invest his money, and most important of all, once he has taken sides as a bear or a bull, they know how to publish the forecasts and the information that will make him stick to his position until they have extracted the last cent of the last dollar that he can afford to lose. That is what the publicity department can do, and aiding and abetting them at all times are the sleek and smiling brokers--financial courtezans--genial, jovial men, bidding you welcome to the warmth and light and luxury of their offices; joking with you, advising you, humoring your wild ideas and your crazy theories of speculation, gathering their commissions as their pay and knowing, in the bottom of what they call their hearts, that once you are in their clutches, you won't escape while you have a penny to your name. That is your average broker--a licensed thief, a man of ill-fame, a speculative prostitute."

There followed momentary silence. Then Atherton remarked, "I don't doubt the truth of what you say. But admitting that it's so, still you haven't shown us why a man can't sometimes win."

"But I have!" cried Bellingham, "or if I haven't, it's because I haven't made myself clear. Don't you understand? It's nothing more nor less than highway robbery. The insiders play against the public; the insiders with their eyes open, the public blindfolded. Or, to vary the figure, the insiders hold their cards in their hands, while the public lay theirs face up on the table. There's only one result. It's open and shut--cut and dried. Why, at any moment of the day these men have access to the books of any bank or any broker's office in America; they can tell, at a second's notice, just what proportion of the public is long of stocks and just what proportion is short. They know the name and trade and record of every speculator in the market; they know his resources, his commitments; and if they wish to 'get' a man, it is just like some millionaire strolling down with a net to his private fishpond, and picking out some particularly plump fish for his dinner. As a matter of fact, mighty few individuals are successful enough so that it is worth while to go after them, but if the insiders decide to do it, why--snap--and it's all over; not even a ripple comes to the surface. And if it's a pool they decide to swallow--some combination of foolish millionaires who have grown suddenly rich--then it becomes a very pretty game, like shooting or fishing or bull-fighting or any other so-called sport where the odds are all one way. It takes a little longer--the death struggle is more drawn out--sometimes a bubble or two does come to the surface--but the result is always the same. You must see it now; I'm sure you do. It is the absolute quintessence of simplicity."

Atherton sat silent for a moment; then, as the true significance of the secretary's story dawned upon him, he murmured to himself, slowly and with infinite meaning, "Well, by *Heck!*"

Bellingham glanced at his watch; then drew from his pocket a packet of papers and a sealed envelope, and handed them to Atherton. "I can't stay much longer," he said, "but here is the proof of my story; the papers are the results of my experiments; the envelope contains the holy of holies, the key to the whole mystery. I can give you the gist of the matter now. The greatest achievement in their whole wonderful system is their method of communicating their plans. You can see how necessary it must be; they are dealing with a hysterical public, who in time of panic follow each other like sheep. Therefore, when some unexpected event occurs--the Northern Pacific corner, war, disaster of any kind--if these men cannot consult together almost instantly, they may face ruin, even for individuals as powerful as themselves. How then will they communicate? By cable? Telegraph? Telephone? Too cumbersome. Too many people to handle the messages. Simpler far a code, a cipher, so that what appears to be an ordinary transaction recorded on the tape becomes in reality a piece of information that shapes the destiny of the market, and of the thousands who vainly seek to fathom the secret of its ups and downs. To issue these is the special duty of one man. I know that all this is true, and I fear that they suspect that I possess this knowledge. In any event, the game is too big for me; I would rather be a live dog than a dead lion."

He paused for a moment, but though the three faces bent on his were tense and rigid with excitement, no one spoke, and presently he continued, "But besides being their greatest strength, you can see how this wonderful system might be their greatest weakness as well. And when I say this, I refer to the possibility of the system's being discovered. Now the originators of this plan were men of intelligence and ability; they must have seen this danger, and the necessity of safeguarding their secret in every possible way. And they did so. But Fate is stronger than man, and through a trick of Fate they have been found out."

As he finished speaking, he rose from his seat. "I dare not stay longer," he said, "and for the sake of all three of you, I prefer not to go from this house directly into the street. Isn't there some way, Blagden, by which I could go along the roofs and down by some other exit?"

"Yes," Blagden agreed, "we can do that." And with a handshake the secretary took his leave of Mills and Atherton, and followed Blagden up the ladder, along the chimney tops, until an open skylight at the end of the block furnished them their opportunity, and at the foot of the stairs Bellingham, after carefully reconnoitering, made ready to depart.

"If it's necessary to see you again," whispered Blagden, "what is your boat, and when does she sail?"

"The *Pernambuco*," Bellingham answered. "She leaves at seven o'clock to-morrow morning. Good-by and good luck." And the next instant he had slipped out into the street, and had disappeared from sight.

CHAPTER XIV

A Triple Discovery

Blagden returned as he had come, quickly remounting the stairs of the lodging house, ascending the ladder and crossing the roofs, and at length, with a feeling of relief, clambered down into his own dwelling, and re-entered his apartment, to find Mills and Atherton seated at the table, busily examining the documents which Bellingham had left behind him.

"Now then," said Blagden brusquely, "leave those papers alone a minute; there's time enough for them later. But here's the question to settle first. We've been listening to the damndest yarn I ever heard in my life. And what I want to know is this. Do you fellows believe it, or don't you?"

"I don't," Mills answered readily. "Not for a minute. Bellingham appeared to be a very decent chap, but I don't consider him sane. I think he's gone crazy over this thing. It's too tough a story to swallow."

Blagden smiled. "Tubby," he rejoined, "you were born a doubter. You may suffer from other faults, but your imagination will never be your ruin; I'm sure of that. What do you say, Atherton? Do you believe it?"

"Yes, I do," Atherton promptly rejoined. "You see, Tubby," he added, turning to Mills, "I've had the advantage of knowing Bellingham before he knew he was being watched, and he was as sane a man then as you would wish to see. Of course he's a nervous wreck now, but who wouldn't be? He must feel like a hare with the hounds after him. I hope he gets away all right."

"Oh, nonsense!" cried Mills unbelievingly, "he'll get away. I don't believe he's being followed at all."

"Well, I do," Atherton retorted. "You can bet that fellow who was after him was no ordinary detective, and if he had the enterprise to be climbing pine trees at two o'clock in the morning, to get the goods on Bellingham, I don't believe he's going to let him escape if he can help it. What's your opinion?" he asked of Blagden, who stood by the mantel piece, smoking furiously, his brow contracted as he pondered over the amazing story to which they had just been listening.

Blagden laid aside his pipe and began pacing up and down the room. "Frankly, Atherton," he confessed, "I'm puzzled. I'm half inclined to believe the whole thing is true; it would explain practically everything about the market which has perplexed us for so long. And yet it's such a romantic, impossible sort of a tale that I can't convince myself it's so; at least, not without further proof. But I'm sure of one thing; we ought to investigate with all the care in the world; it may be the opportunity of a lifetime. Can you make anything out of his figures?" And he motioned toward the papers on the table.

"Not a great deal," Atherton answered. "I should say he was still in the experimental stage; he's guessing at different theories, and then seeing how they fit the facts. But of course, unless you've got the whole code at your fingers' ends, you couldn't expect to follow the ups and downs of the tape intelligently. He has made a beginning; it remains for us to try to complete it."

"And what was the other paper he spoke of?" asked Blagden. "What did he call it? 'The holy of holies'?"

Atherton started to draw it from his pocket; then, with an apologetic half laugh, thrust it back again, walked to the door, and cautiously reconnoitered. But no one was in sight, and accordingly he rejoined his friends, again pulling the envelope from its resting place, while Mills and Blagden peered eagerly over his shoulder. The first envelope contained a second one; the second a third. "April fool," muttered Mills. "I told you he was crazy," but was suddenly silent as Atherton drew from the third envelope the paper, faded and yellow with age, which Bellingham had found in the vault, and with it a typewritten copy, explaining its contents as far as the secretary had been able to decipher them. No faintest sound disturbed the stillness of the room as they read, and as they finished, they remained motionless, staring at each other, with all trace of levity or disbelief gone suddenly from their faces. Then Mills, like a man awakening from a trance, slowly passed his hand across his forehead. "He couldn't have faked that paper," he murmured. "That's the real thing."

But the others scarcely heard him. "Then it *is* true," said Atherton at length. "Everything we've heard and guessed at, but never honestly believed. There is a 'Money Trust,' there *is* a 'System.' Good Lord, it's like a dream!"

"A nightmare," responded Blagden grimly. "No wonder we couldn't win. And now let's take our time, and go over it

again. I should say that 'holy of holies' was right; I believe this scrap of paper is just about the most important document in the world."

Side by side, they seated themselves at the table, and word by word began their study of the cryptic talisman. Half way through Atherton called a halt. "So far, so good," he observed. "As Bellingham told us, it's the very height of simplicity. They feed the public with good news, bait them with bull tips, and then when a sufficient number have loaded up at the top, they break the market and incidentally break the fools who have been caught. Then begins the campaign of bad news--famine, pestilence and sudden death--then arrive the bear tips, and when all the longs have been driven out and a new crop of suckers have gone short at the bottom, then comes the accumulation by the Money Gods and up goes the market for them to sell on to the next crop of idiots who will never buy except at the very top, after stocks have advanced from ten to twenty points. But all that doesn't help us much, unless we can tell what is the bottom and what is the top. What we want to know is about these signals. Signals on the tape. What a wonderful scheme! When Bellingham found this paper, he must have felt as if he had happened upon a ton of dynamite."

"Dynamite," said Blagden, "is a very happy word. If we could prove the authenticity of this paper, we could just about blow this old country sky-high. We could close every stock exchange in America, and drive the Money Gods into exile for their health. Oh, 'dynamite' is too mild a word; this would be a higher explosive than that."

As he finished speaking, Atherton was conscious of a sudden chill of dismay. Rightly or wrongly, he had no desire to see harm befall Helen Hamilton's father, and was correspondingly relieved to hear Mills exclaim, "Yes, but we don't want to do anything like that. The only time to be reformers is when we've made all the money we can use. We want ours, Blagden, so for Heaven's sake don't think of blowing this thing until we've had a chance at it."

Blagden smiled at the stout man's earnestness. "Oh, don't worry," he reassured him. "I was only emphasizing the importance of the paper. You are quite right, Tubby; let the Money Gods live and wax fat. All we want is a few of the crumbs that fall from the master's table."

"Sure thing," Atherton assented with relief, "we're all agreed about that. And now let's examine the rest of the paper. The signals themselves; that's what interests us."

Once more they bent to their task. "On the watch," read Mills, "for these signals. Now what is the sense in that? Of course they would be on the watch for them. They would be fools not to."

But suddenly Blagden gave a cry of amazement, and his companions, gazing at him, saw his face go white, and then flush with crimson. He sprang to his feet. "I've got it," he exclaimed, half incoherent with excitement. "Don't you see? *On the watch!* It doesn't mean *be* on the watch; it means the watch itself. It's the missing words that spoil the sense. It isn't a verb; it's a noun. *A* watch. The watch a man carries in his pocket. That's where the key to the cipher is, and there couldn't be a better place. No one would suspect it, and it's always at hand. That's what the girl told me; don't you remember? Always looking at his watch, when she spied upon him by the tickers. She is right. Her friend is one of these men. Just think of it. No wonder she always won. And see what it means for us. Monte Cristo wasn't in it. We've got a fortune in our grasp."

He paused, his eyes gleaming, his whole face tense with excitement. Then, going over to the sideboard, he poured for himself an even stiffer drink than he had prepared for Bellingham, and hastily gulped it down. "I needed that," he said. "Some excitement to-night. This is probably the wildest day of our bright young lives."

Atherton had remained seated, still intent upon the paper before him. "Steady, Blagden," he objected. "You're jumping at conclusions. This may be all coincidence. But your theory is ingenious. And if you *should* be right--"

He did not finish his sentence, letting his imagination dwell upon the possibilities of the future.

"If I *should* be right," echoed Blagden reproachfully. "Why Good Lord, man, of course I'm right. If Tubby had doubted me, I could have forgiven him, but you ought to have the vision to piece the thing together. Oh, God--" he flared forth again, "what a bully old world it is. Checkered, but never dull. Here we were, two days ago, busted like a flat tire, and now the lamp of Aladdin awaits our touch. And all--" he added suddenly, "because we coöperated. I'd forgotten that in the excitement. I guess I'm the original little coöperator, all right. Just think what's coming to us, boys. Steam yachts, motors, women--"

He smacked his lips, but Mills, the practical, now questioned, "Yes, but what about getting the watch of this eminent but erring financier? Are you going up to him to ask the time of day, and then will you grab it and run? What's he going to be doing? Naturally he's no spring chicken."

"Oh," Blagden answered with confidence, "that's merely matter of detail. Once we know who the man is, we'll get the watch. Just look at our advantage. We know what he's got, and he doesn't know that we know. That gives us the whip hand, right away. As a matter of fact, I dare say the lady could help us."

Mills brightened. "That's a good idea," he agreed. "Something like the panel game. I believe that would work."

"But there's one thing," suggested Atherton, "that we ought not to neglect. If Bellingham intends to leave the country, never to return, we ought to be sure that we have everything he knows. Let's go over these papers of his now, and make a list of anything we don't understand. We could see him in the morning and have a last word with him before he sails."

"You're right," Blagden cried, "but wait a minute first. There's something else I want to see about."

He disappeared into his bedroom, from whence they presently heard the tinkle of his telephone. Shortly he returned. "Now then," he said briskly, "luck is still with us. I rang up the girl, pretending that I wanted to see her to-morrow evening, and she told me that she was engaged and that I must be sure and not come to her house. That, of course, means only one thing. You, Atherton, meet me at Hillcrest Station to-morrow night at eight, and we'll do a little detective work. And you, Tubby, get up at five thirty to-morrow morning and go over to the *Pernambuco* with a list of questions that we'll make out now. While everything is going our way, we'll lose no time."

For an hour or more they worked, and finally disbanded, Mills going to his room to set his alarm clock and then, his brain on fire with excitement, to toss restlessly about for the balance of the night, with a hundred wild dreams and visions disturbing his rest. With the first whirr of the alarm he was out of bed, and disposing of a cup of coffee and a roll, he sallied forth to obtain the final information from Bellingham. The good weather of the day before had vanished; the morning was thick and foggy, and as he neared the wharves Mills found himself inclined to shiver, half with the chill of the wind, half from the over-excitement of the preceding night. He found the vessel without trouble, a big, old-fashioned, somewhat dingy craft, and with an inquiry or two made his way readily enough to Bellingham's cabin. His knock, however, brought no answer, and after a moment's hesitation he tried the door, found it unfastened, and walked in. The secretary's bag lay open on the table, its contents tossed about in confusion, and the secretary himself lay in his bunk, sound asleep. "Tired out," thought Mills, and crossing the cabin, he extended his hand to awaken Bellingham, and in doing so inadvertently brushed with his fingers the cheek of the slumbering man. The flesh, to his touch, was cold as marble, and on the instant sudden dread gripped him by the throat as he nerved himself for the ordeal and slowly withdrew the bedclothes from Bellingham's face.

There followed a ghastly moment, and he found himself staggering back across the cabin, faint and sick with horror, and with blotches of crimson flashing and wheeling before his eyes. Then, by a mighty effort recovering his control, he made his way, like a man in a dream, on deck, back to the gang-plank, and thus to the shore, thanking Heaven for the pall of fog which still enshrouded land and sea. Like a criminal, he crept back to his lodgings, and like some hunted fugitive, he kept all day to his rooms, a great dread in his heart as he pondered on the craft and power of these unseen foes against whom he and his friends had dared to wage unequal war.

And thus the long day passed, dark and lowering, with occasional spurts of rain. But toward sunset the wind veered to the west, scattering the clouds across the sky, with gleams of sunshine filtering through the rifts, and by the time Atherton and Blagden met at the station, clear stars were shining overhead and a crescent moon gave promise of fair weather to come.

"Did you have any trouble getting away?" asked Blagden, as they tramped up the narrow and deserted road.

"No," Atherton answered, "things have been quiet all day, and to-night Mr. Hamilton was called to the city on business, and fortunately for me he decided to go by train, so there was nothing to detain me. But I don't mind telling you, Blagden," he added, "that I'm not a bit keen about this whole business. Eavesdropping isn't a pleasant task, at best, and if by any chance we should be caught, it would be a humiliating experience."

"No fear," Blagden answered. "There's a hedge around the house thick enough to hide a regiment. We'll creep into it, one each side of the path which leads to the house, and there's an electric light across the street that ought to make it easy enough to get a look at our man. Tracing him afterward may be a more difficult matter, but I don't think so. Naturally, he won't be suspicious, and that is a point in our favor. Here we are, now, right ahead. Just before we reach the drive, you duck into the hedge, and I'll walk by and then do the same on the other side. Between us, we'll get a glance at him, and follow him if we can."

Five minutes later, Atherton was comfortably ensconced in his hiding place, and had settled down to what proved to be a tiresome vigil. Ten o'clock came and went, half past ten, and then, at last, the sound of an opening door, a glimpse of a man and woman in the dimly lighted hall, a farewell embrace, the door closed and a man's figure came leisurely down the path.

Atherton, with beating heart, strained his eyes upon the spot where the man must pass. Now the footsteps came nearer, and nearer still; now the man's figure was plainly visible in the radiance of the light; and all at once Atherton was hardly able to repress a gasp of amazement and consternation. For the face of the man was one that he knew well. It was the face of Marshall Hamilton.

CHAPTER XV

Thrust and Parry

The atmosphere of Blagden's room was tense with uncertainty. A storm seemed imminent; danger signals filled the air. Blagden himself, the embodiment of nervous energy, paced continually to and fro; Atherton sat at the table, mechanically tracing aimless figures on the pad before him; while Mills, the taciturn and phlegmatic, instead of reclining, as usual, in the easy chair, sat bolt upright, balanced on its edge, his expression eloquent of anxiety.

The temporary silence was broken explosively. "Damnation, Atherton," cried Blagden, "can't you see that such a thing would never happen again in a million years. As a rule, I'm not religious, but I tell you this has made me believe that we're chosen as the instruments of Providence. I believe there's a 'system' in Heaven as well as on earth, and I believe that God Almighty has picked us out to break the power of the Money Gods for the rest of time."

Atherton smiled, a little wearily. "When Fate is on your side," he answered, "and you can see millions ahead of you, then it's an easy matter to believe in God."

"But who wouldn't," Blagden insisted. "Less than a week ago three penniless adventurers meet in a café, and go blindly forth to seek adventure. Each of them follows a separate strand of incident, which is apparently quite independent of the other two, until suddenly, like magic, the three strands meet and unite in one. Why, we have the whole story now. Even with what Bellingham told us, we knew almost enough, and what we saw last night gives us the key to the whole affair. Here's our man, our big market operator, carrying upon his person the ultimate cipher of the code. All we have to do is by hook or crook to gain possession of his watch, and we'll have the chance that will never come to three men again as long as the world lasts. So don't stand in the way, Atherton; be a sport."

"It's a simple matter," Atherton replied, "to say, 'get possession of his watch,' but haven't you read stories of treasure chests guarded by some secret contrivance which meant death to those who tried to open them? That's the kind of thing we're up against. Bellingham tried to solve the mystery, and Bellingham is dead. And do you suppose for one instant that if his story is true--if these men have the power he says they have--that we are going to meddle with their secrets and escape unscathed? If you do think so, you were never more mistaken in your life. Why, rather than go ahead as you want us to do, I would take my chance on walking into a powder factory, with a lighted pipe in my mouth and the wind blowing a gale."

Mills nodded solemnly. Life to him was something precious; many delights lay before him through the placid years. "You're right, Atherton," he agreed. "It's tremendously tempting, but this putting your head into the lion's jaws is a dangerous game; if he happens to close them, why--good-by."

Blagden, the dynamic, exploded again. "Oh, you quitters!" he vociferated, "why do you stand in such awe of this gang. I tell you they're only human. The bigger they are, the harder they fall. Under ordinary circumstances, I'll admit that we'd have no show. But see what Fate has done for us. Here is Atherton, in the employ of Marshall Hamilton. Here's Mills, pals with the celebrated Stoat, who claims to be the best little housebreaker in New York. What could be easier than for Atherton to leave a window open, so that Stoat could slip into the house, make his way into Hamilton's bedroom, and get possession of the watch? Easy? Why, it would be child's play."

"But that," objected Mills, "would be only the beginning. Even assuming that we got the watch, as soon as it was missed there would be the devil to pay. Every speculator in the country would be a marked man. We might have the knowledge but would we dare to use it?"

"Tubby," retorted Blagden savagely, "you make me tired. I've considered all the possibilities, and I've decided that there's just one way for us to succeed. Stoat must get the watch, copy the cypher, and then return it again before it's missed. In that way we'll be doing no harm to anyone, and we'll be absolutely safe. Nobody can have the slightest ground for suspicion."

"Oh, that's different," Mills assented. "If we could do that, we'd be all right." But Atherton promptly demurred. "Blagden," he said firmly, "you've got to realize that my position in this whole affair has changed. I'm working for Mr. Hamilton; he has treated me well; and I can't help you out on any such plan as this. It wouldn't be the decent thing."

"Oh, decent be damned," rejoined Blagden with heat. "You went in with us on this adventure scheme; we agreed to stick together; and now that our chance has really come, you refuse to take advantage of it. I don't consider, Atherton, that you're playing square with us."

Atherton's eyes gleamed. "Oh, come," he remonstrated, "I'd go slow with that kind of talk. We went into this together, as you say, but that doesn't mean that we're bound to stick through thick and thin, regardless of whatever

circumstances may arise. What do you say, Tubby? Isn't that stretching things beyond all reason?"

"Oh, of course," Mills agreed, "there's a limit somewhere. But I can't see why you should worry about Marshall Hamilton. Apparently, he's nothing but a plain, ordinary robber; the only difference between him and other criminals is that he operates on a larger scale. I don't see where he comes in at all. And as Blagden says, it isn't as though we were harming him. Suppose we get what we're after. All we want is to be let alone until we've made our fortunes; then we can decide whether we dare expose the crowd or not. But for the present, no harm is coming to Hamilton."

"How do you know it isn't?" Atherton insisted. "You're assuming that everything is to result as you plan it. But you can't tell. Even for Stoat, admitting that he's as skillful as we think he is, this is going to be a delicate job. Suppose he makes his way successfully as far as Hamilton's bedroom, and then suppose that Hamilton awakens, that there's a fight, and that Hamilton is killed. What are we then? Murderers, aren't we? Not legally, perhaps, but morally."

"Oh, rot!" cried Blagden contemptuously, "that's not a fair way to argue. Supposing--supposing--why, if you once begin, you can suppose anything you please. We've got to figure on probabilities, not possibilities. And tell me this, Atherton. I don't admit for an instant that you are right, but assuming that you are--assuming the very worst that can happen--why are you so solicitous about Marshall Hamilton? What's his life to you? He is protected by respectability, and that's all. Apart from that, he's a robber, a common plunderer; he's got your money and Tubby's money and mine. He takes the risks of his profession; he can't complain. So I ask you again, why the devil are you so afraid of his being harmed?"

Atherton hesitated. Naturally honest and straightforward, he knew perfectly well in his own mind what his real reasons were--that it was not so much consideration for his employer that influenced him as the fear that something might happen to distress Helen herself. Yet he was loth to admit this, until all at once the keen-witted Blagden, noticing his confusion, suddenly leaped to the correct conclusion.

"I have it!" he cried. "It's not Marshall Hamilton at all; he has nothing to do with it. It's his daughter." And as Atherton's expression confirmed his conjecture, he added savagely, "Look here, man, what a hypocrite you are. Here you pose as a moralist, and all the time you're laying your plans to marry Hamilton's daughter, become independent for life, and then leave Tubby and me in the lurch. That's a pretty trick."

He was thoroughly angered, and like most angry men, had gone too far. Atherton leaped to his feet. "Stop it," he cried, with ominous calm. "Stop it right away. What you're saying is nonsense, every word of it."

"Every word of it," repeated Blagden. "Do you deny that you would like to marry Miss Hamilton?"

Atherton did not hesitate now. "There is no question of marrying anybody," he answered. "I'm not in a position, financially, to think of marriage. If you ask me whether I'm in love with Miss Hamilton, I'll tell you that I most certainly am. But when you talk about marrying and becoming independent, and when you talk about my going back on you and Tubby, then you're simply ranting about what isn't true."

There was a pause, the two eyeing each other like wrestlers about to come to a grapple, while Mills, the lover of harmony, gazed miserably from one to the other, in distress at this sudden disagreement.

"Well," said Blagden at length, "I don't see that your reasons make any difference, anyway; I made a mistake when I brought them into the discussion. But the practical result is that you decline to help us with this scheme. Isn't that the long and short of it?"

"Yes," Atherton admitted, "it is. It's too risky, and it's criminal, and altogether it's a poor game to mix up in. I'm sure we'll do better to let it alone."

"And in the next place," went on Blagden, "to make use of Biblical language, which you, as a moralist, will undoubtedly approve, if you are not with us, are you against us? Will you remain neutral, and let Tubby and myself go ahead with this plan ourselves?"

Atherton shook his head. "No," he replied, "if this were simply a case of robbery, I suppose, under all the circumstances, I shouldn't object to it, but the trouble is that you can't tell where you are going to stop. Therefore, I'm opposed to any such attempt as you propose."

"Very well," said Blagden, "now we know where we stand. Only please don't think you have a monopoly of all the brains in this crowd, because you haven't. And now I'm going to ask you another question. Has it occurred to your pure and youthful mind that the events of last night may have some bearing oh the situation?"

Atherton started. Such a possibility had not occurred to him. "What do you mean by that?" he demanded in his turn.

"Just this," retorted Blagden. "That if worse comes to worse, I mean to take a parting shot at our friend Hamilton by letting his wife know of this little affair of his. His wife--and his daughter."

Atherton's heart sank. "But listen, Blagden," he cried, "you wouldn't do that. Why, that would be rotten, sneaking blackmail. No gentleman could stoop to that."

Blagden grinned. "Then I'm not a gentleman," he scoffed. "How interesting these distinctions are. Your prospective father-in-law is a robber and is unfaithful to his wife, and yet he is a gentleman. It's quite an elastic term. But I'm not proud. I'll forfeit my title to being one. But gentleman or not, if you say that you are going to interfere with my plans, I'll make things hum in the Hamilton family."

"But Mrs. Hamilton," objected Atherton, "is an invalid. News like that might easily kill her. You have no right to make her suffer."

"Oh, that's not my lookout," disclaimed Blagden airily. "Blame her husband, or Fate, or anyone else, but not me. So on the whole, Atherton, don't you think you'd better withdraw your opposition, and let us go ahead?"

Atherton, realizing the difficulty of his position, made no answer. To allow wife and daughter to know of Marshall Hamilton's double life was unthinkable; better far, it seemed, to risk the danger of the attempt to rob the banker of his watch. But while he pondered, suddenly, to his amazement, Blagden's whole manner underwent a complete change, and he burst into laughter.

"Heavens, man, but you take things seriously!" he cried. "I didn't mean what I said. I was only seeing how far I could push the argument. You're quite right; we couldn't take the risk. We'll give up the whole affair, and wait for a better chance."

Atherton stared at him, relieved and yet incredulous. Nor did Mills appear to know whether to believe this sudden change of front was simulated or sincere.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed, "do you mean you're going to stop now? After all we've been through? That doesn't sound like you, Blagden; you never were a quitter."

Blagden threw him a glance of veiled meaning. "Oh, I don't mind quitting when I have to," he answered. "Atherton's right, and that settles it." He strolled across the room as he spoke, and in his most winning manner laid his hand on Atherton's shoulder. "But you must own up, old man," he said, "that you owe a good deal to me. You seem to be on the crest of the wave now, but don't forget who launched you from the shore. When you're happily married and settled down, I shall come around to the back door and expect a cold meal if I need one."

At once Atherton melted. "I realize everything," he responded, "and if it hadn't been for your energy, I don't know what I should be doing now. I don't want to seem ungrateful, but you can see that I'm in a hard position. I want to do the decent thing by everyone, if I can."

"That's right," Blagden agreed heartily, "and something else is bound to turn up soon. Where can I get hold of you if I want you? How much longer do you stay as chauffeur?"

"Only till Monday," Atherton answered. "After that, write me at the Standard Motor Works till further notice. And now I must be getting home; there's no train for two hours if I miss the next one. No hard feeling, Blagden?"

"Not a bit," Blagden answered. "You're quite right. I didn't agree with you at first, but I do now. Good-by and good luck."

His tone was cordiality itself, but when he had regained the street, Atherton began to wonder whether or not his friend was speaking the truth. As Mills had artlessly phrased it, it "didn't sound like" Blagden; Blagden the bold, the tenacious and the daring. "I'll take no chances," he reflected, "I owe him a great deal, as he said, but I can still keep my eyes open." And if he could have looked back into the room he had just left, and could have heard the flood of vituperation which streamed from Blagden's lips, he would have realized the wisdom of his resolve.

CHAPTER XVI

The Final Effort

The clock in the village struck two, and Atherton, crouching in the darkness amid the shrubbery on the lawn, hailed with relief the distant coming of daybreak.

Unable, upon reflection, to credit Blagden's sincerity, he had left the employ of Mr. Hamilton on Monday, as agreed, but before beginning work at the factory had asked for, and obtained, a three days' leave of absence. And now, for the third successive evening, he had come to stand guard, trusting that if Blagden tried to carry out his plan, he could at least prevent danger of injury to the inmates of the house.

Between midnight and three o'clock in the morning; this, he had decided, would be the time for any such attempt, for before midnight, the house had scarcely settled down to slumber, and after three the first faint light of the midsummer dawn began to brighten in the sky. The first two nights had passed without incident, and of this, the third and last, only an hour remained; yet Atherton experienced no sense of relaxation from the tension of his vigil, for if the trial was to be made at all, now seemed to him the fitting time. The night was overcast; a fresh damp wind blew from the south; and a veiled moon and scuds of flying cloud portended rain. "If I were a housebreaker," thought Atherton, "I should call this my chance. You couldn't see a man to-night until he was right on top of you--My God, what's that?"

Not twenty feet away from him, a shadowy figure glided, ghost like, through the shrubbery, bent low and travelling so rapidly that before Atherton had time fairly to collect his senses, the man's form was again invisible in the darkness. Atherton's heart-beats quickened. That this was Stoat he had no doubt whatever, and now, for the first time, he realized the difficulties of his task--an unskilled amateur attempting to shadow one of the best professional burglars in New York. Yet whether he liked it or not, the moment for action had come, and acutely conscious of the awkwardness of his movements, he crept as best he could after his predecessor. An open window on the veranda showed him where the thief had entered, and with hammering pulses Atherton followed suit, and automatic in hand crept cautiously up the staircase to the second floor, and at the head of the stairs crouched, listening, in the shadow of the hall. Marshall Hamilton's room lay to the left. Helen's was directly opposite the stairway, and from the right, where Mrs. Hamilton slept, he could hear stifled breathing and an occasional low moan which told him that her malady was at its worst. Far away, at the end of the hall, a single light burned dimly, and presently, without the slightest sound, he saw the housebreaker's sinister and shadowy form coming stealthily, with the same rapid gliding motion, down the hallway toward the stairs. Clearly, thought Atherton, Stoat had accomplished the first part of his mission in safety, and he had just begun to experience a sensation of relief when all at once, to his consternation, came the very sound he had been dreading, the faint tinkle of the bell which connected Mrs. Hamilton's room with her daughter's, and by means of which the elder woman was accustomed to call the younger to her aid. Stoat, too, must have heard it, for he stopped instantly, and for a few breathless moments all was silence. Then the shadowy form once more advanced, and had almost reached the head of the stairs when the door of Helen's room was suddenly thrown open, and the girl, clad in her wrapper, stepped quickly forth into the hall.

What followed occurred with the rapidity of lightning. Simultaneously the girl detected the presence of the housebreaker, and Stoat sprang forward with upraised arm; and in the next fraction of a second--a space too short to permit the use of his revolver--Atherton too had leaped, and the blow of the blackjack, meant for Helen, struck him a glancing blow on the head, and sent him reeling to the floor, while Stoat, at headlong speed, made off down the stairs. Yet he was not to escape scotfree, for through the haze that blinded him, and despite the agony of pain, Atherton contrived to raise himself on one elbow, and steadying himself with a mighty effort, sent a shot down the staircase after the fugitive. Then the lights that flashed before his eyes seemed to recede and to grow faint; darkness descended upon the world; and he fell back unconscious, a creeping trickle of red bearing witness to the power of the burglar's blow.

Meanwhile, in the trees near the turn of the road, Blagden and Mills waited anxiously, gazing at the outline of the house, filmed dimly against the sky. Here at last was the climax of their adventure; if Stoat lived up to his reputation, success was almost within their grasp. And thus, although the night was mild, Blagden was aware that he was trembling with excitement, and even the phlegmatic Mills was moved beyond his usual calm, and fidgeted uneasily as the moments passed.

Still came no sign of their accomplice, and at length Blagden turned the flashlight on the dial of his watch. "He's been gone twenty minutes," he muttered. "Pretty nearly time for him now."

"Yes," Mills assented, "he said he meant to do a quick job. But I suppose it all depends on the watch; whether he can get it and how much is on it. *Great God!*"

Across the silence of the night, sharp, unmistakable, ominous, sounded the report of a pistol. Blagden uttered an oath. "Damnation," he cried, "they've got him."

"Perhaps he fired himself," suggested Mills.

"I don't believe it," returned Blagden. "I told him not to shoot, except as a last resource. Listen. What's that?"

They paused, every nerve on the alert, but Blagden had been mistaken, and for some moments they heard nothing. Then, at last, far away up the road, there sounded through the stillness the sound of rapid footsteps. "He's got away," cried Mills. "Thank Heaven for that."

"I don't care a hang for *him*," returned Blagden brutally, "if only he's got what we want. We'd better be ready. They'll be after him."

More and more distinctly sounded the footfalls, and presently a dark figure became visible. Mills started from the bushes, but Blagden laid a restraining hand upon his arm. "Careful," he cautioned. "Let's be sure it's Stoat."

But in another moment it was evident that it was their accomplice. And evidently, too, he was either hurt, or spent with running, for they could distinguish his hurried, gasping breaths, and could see that he appeared to be advancing aimlessly, zigzagging from one side of the road to the other.

Blagden stepped forward, "Here," he called sharply, "this way." And at the sound of his voice Stoat turned and staggered toward them. He was in sore straits. His head swung back and forth like that of an athlete exhausted in a race, and keeping to his work only by a sheer effort of the will. At once, Blagden put his arm around him, and half drew, half carried him into the bushes, but at the contact the housebreaker could not keep back a groan. "They--got me," he whispered haltingly. "I'm all in. Guess--I'm going to croak."

As he uttered the words, Blagden suddenly felt his burden relax in his grasp, and picking the man up bodily, he retreated still further into the woods, and laid him down upon the ground. Then, examining him with the flashlight, he ripped open his coat and vest and saw that his shirt was stained with blood. "Here's a mess," he murmured, and made his way back to Mills. "Keep a good lookout," he directed, and returned to Stoat, who lay without sound or motion on his bed of leaves and moss.

"Done for," reflected Blagden. But it was not Stoat's condition that disturbed him; his mind was set wholly on the success or failure of his mission. And accordingly he stooped, ran his fingers quickly over the housebreaker's person, felt something in one of the pockets of his vest, and with fingers which trembled drew forth an old-fashioned watch which he felt instinctively could be no other than the one he sought. Without the loss of a second, he threw open the case, and hardly daring to look for fear of a crushing disappointment, beheld, to his delight, row after row of tiny figures, interspersed with arrows pointing up or down. Patient delving among Bellingham's papers had made him familiar with the theory of the symbols, and instantly he realized that here, as plain as print, lay the precious key to the whole vast mystery. And then, in a flash, it came over him how wonderfully Fate had played into their hands, and though every moment was of value, yet he felt certain, with the gambler's instinct, that he must take an added risk, and once again hastened back to Mills' side.

"If you hear anyone coming," he whispered, "let me know instantly. Otherwise keep quiet until I return." And once more regaining the housebreaker's side, he drew a notebook from his pocket, and with scrupulous care transferred the table of figures from the case. This accomplished, he replaced the watch in the pocket of the injured man, and bending over him with the hope that Stoat was either dead or dying, he asked, "How do you feel?"

But to his dismay the housebreaker showed a wonderful vitality and tenacity of life. "Better," he gasped. "I believe I could walk, if you'll give me a lift."

Blagden, calculating the future with a heart of steel, nerved himself for the task before him. "All right," he answered soothingly, "I'll help you. Lie still a minute." Then, with a movement quicker than thought, which caught Stoat wholly off his guard, he threw himself across the burglar's body, with one hand over his mouth and with the other gripping his nostrils in an iron clasp. Galvanized into life, the housebreaker, with the instinctive effort of self-preservation, for a moment struggled desperately, while horrible choking gasps were muffled in his throat, but his injury, his weakness, and Blagden's terrible grip made the encounter all too unequal, and presently there came a quick collapse, and his writhings ceased. Blagden rose to his knees, and lifted one of Stoat's arms. It fell back limply. Then, with a shudder of disgust, he picked up the body in his arms and bore it rapidly toward the road.

He found Mills standing where he had left him, listening intently. "I think they're coming," he whispered.

"So much the better," answered Blagden grimly. And advancing from the bushes, he placed the body of the dead man face downward in the road, and as his ears caught the sound of an approaching motor, he leaped back to shelter and grasped his companion by the arm. "Come on!" he cried. "We must get away from here as quickly as we can."

A moment or two after they had vanished into the depths of the woods, the headlights of a motor, driven at slow speed, brightened the road, and presently a man's voice cried sharply, "There he is. Right ahead." Immediately Marshall Hamilton leaped from the car, ran forward, and precisely as Blagden had done, began hastily to examine Stoat's clothing. Instantly his fingers closed on the object he sought, and with a gasp of relief, he drew it forth and returned it to his own pocket. Then, without a glance at the housebreaker, "Saved," he murmured. "Thank God."

CHAPTER XVII

The Power and the Glory

Mills drained his second cup of coffee, lit a cigarette, and rising, walked over to the window and gazed forth across the square. "A funny little town," he observed, half to Blagden and half to himself. "The buildings are low and the brows of the citizens are high--or supposed to be." Then, turning, he continued, "Blagden, there's undoubtedly a touch of humor to all this. Here we are, breakfasting in a private room in Boston's most exclusive hotel, like a couple of millionaires, and after we've begged and borrowed, raked and scraped, the sum total of our wealth amounts to just six thousand dollars. I call it a case of make or break."

"Make or break," Blagden assented, "is right. But I'm not worrying. We're going down into State Street with the best chance that two fellows ever had in this world. And I believe we're going to get away with it."

"I hope so," said Mills somewhat dubiously, "but oughtn't we to wait a while longer? It's only three days since we got what we went after. I should think it might be safer to lie low until everything has blown over--long enough so that no possible suspicion could attach to us."

"No," Blagden answered, "emphatically not. In the first place, everything broke just right for us. They must have found Stoat with the watch in his pocket, and that is proof positive that he tried to escape with it and failed. How can they connect us with him?"

"Through Atherton, of course," responded Mills.

"It's true," Blagden agreed, "that Atherton might impart his suspicions to Hamilton, but the betting is all the other way. In the first place, if Atherton accuses us, he is obliged to confess to knowing a lot more than he is supposed to know, and considering what happened to Bellingham, I imagine that might be equivalent to a sudden and unpleasant death. Now if he's in love with Hamilton's daughter, that is the last thing he's going to do. And besides, what does he gain? Nothing. And even if he could keep himself clear of danger, he must realize that it's too risky to try to hurt us while we're holding our blackmail threat in reserve. No, we've nothing to fear from Atherton, and as for the rest of it, there's no reason under the sun why we should be thought of for a moment."

"I believe you're right," Mills admitted. "But I'll feel better if we find our system really works."

"I haven't a doubt of it," Blagden asserted, "but we'll soon know. In any event, we have the code by heart. I could say it backwards and forwards; up and down."

"So could I," answered Mills. "Where did you say you were going to trade?"

"I've found the very place," responded Blagden. "Floyd & Meredith, in the Exchange Building. They are thoroughly reliable, and the office is precisely the right size. It's big enough so we won't attract attention--they have perhaps fifteen or twenty customers in the office, on an average. And it's small enough so that we can always have a place at the ticker, and see our stuff as it comes."

Mills stared out into the sunshine. "And what sized lots," he asked, "are you going to trade in?"

"I shall take no chances," Blagden answered. "I am going to be over cautious, for if anything happens this time, it will surely be our finish. I'm going to play in three lots of a hundred shares each, which will give us twenty points margin on each lot. That's conservative, isn't it?"

"Sure," Mills grinned. "After some of the shoestring margins I've played on, twenty points sounds like the Bank of England, with certain portions of Broadway thrown in. And whether you buy or sell, I suppose it will be on a scale, up or down."

"Exactly," Blagden assented. "That is the way the big men do it; we know that now for a certainty. And what is good enough for them is good enough for us."

There was silence for a moment; then Blagden continued earnestly, "Tubby, if we are right, can you imagine what this is going to mean? Think of it. Actually to win, instead of losing. No more horror of sudden bulges or drops. No more nightmares of dwindling margins. No more agony of stop orders caught and accounts wiped out. To think of piling up gold, steadily, unceasingly, till we have all we want. Honestly, it seems too good to be true."

Mills sighed. "That's what I'm afraid of," he rejoined. "I've been a lamb--or a goat, whichever you choose to call it--so long, that I can't make myself believe we can ever take money out of the market. But there's one comfort; we've always lost before, so if we lose again this time, it won't be a new experience, and we really can't complain."

Blagden rose from his seat. "We mustn't turn faint hearted now!" he cried. "We've been through a good deal in the last ten days, or our nerves would be in better shape. Come on, let's get down to State Street and have it over with. As you say, we can't do more than lose."

A half hour later, they had entered the Exchange Building, ascended to the office of Floyd & Meredith, and were

cordially greeted by Farwell, the amiable, bald-headed and inoffensive customers' man. It was still a few minutes to ten; a dozen speculators talked, read, or studied the "dope" in letters, telegrams and financial papers of all descriptions. Bearishness was in the air. "They're a sale." That was the slogan on every lip; that was the message, express or implied, upon each printed page. From the firm's correspondents in New York came the word, "Sell them on the bulges; don't buy them at any price."

Blagden strolled over to where Farwell was standing. "Not a very bullish crowd in here," he observed.

"You're right, they're not," the customers' man replied. "They're all bears now. And I believe they're right. I think this market is going to break wide open."

"What's a good stock to sell?" asked Blagden.

"I think," Farwell answered, "that the rails will be the most vulnerable. Take Union Pacific, now. Last months' earnings were very poor, and there is talk of labor troubles; I understand they're facing a serious situation. The industrials ought to go down, too. In fact, I think the whole market is a sale, but I believe the rails will drop the most."

Blagden walked over to where Mills was seated, reading the "Boston News Bulletin." "Well," he queried, "what seems to be the big idea?"

Mills looked up from his reading. "The idea," he answered, "is that the country is in a bad way. There's an article here on Union Pacific; it says that in all probability the dividend is going to be cut. If these were the old days, Blagden, and I was relying on my own judgment, I know mighty well what I'd do. I'd sell my head off. The short side looks like a cinch."

"Yes," acknowledged Blagden, "it does. And yet, reasoning from what we know, isn't this the very time to be suspicious?" He turned as he spoke and indicated the little knot of gamblers around the ticker. "Now," he continued, lowering his voice, "according to what Farwell just told me, practically every man there is short of the market. And I suppose this office is only a sample of a great many others; I suppose that it is fair to guess that the majority of traders are short at this moment. Then comes the question: Are they going to win? And if looks are any indication, I judge they're not."

Mills gazed at the group. "Blagden," he confided, "I think I begin to see a great light. I never studied a group of speculators before; I was always so busy with my own troubles that I never thought of anyone else. But it's just as you say; those men are a pretty futile looking crowd. There isn't one of them who looks as if he possessed any real ability. There isn't one of them whose judgment you would be apt to trust. I believe we're having a unique experience. We're seeing the game played from the inside."

Ten o'clock came. The ticker whirred; the crowd pressed closer around the tape; and presently Mills and Blagden strolled over and took their places with the rest. Farwell looked up as they approached and with extended forefinger pointed downward to indicate the trend.

"They're weak," he told them. "Awfully weak. You can sell 'em right here. And there's pressure on Union, all right. It's off a point and a half."

"Guess I'll have to sell some, then," said Blagden, and taking his stand where he could read the tape he watched, outwardly calm, but inwardly experiencing the thrill of excitement which comes to the man who is watching the biggest game in the world. The market was active. Quotation after quotation came whirring forth from the busy machine, and then, all at once, appeared a heavy block of Union Pacific, the figures tallying precisely with the symbols they had learned. Blagden yawned, turned away from the ticker, and walked over to the window. Presently Mills followed. "You saw it?" whispered Blagden.

"Sure," Mills answered. "They're buying it, and after you left they flashed again to buy Reading and then to buy Southern Railway."

"Well," said Blagden, "there's no use waiting. Here's where we sink or swim." And writing out an order to buy a hundred Union Pacific at the market, he walked across the office to the order clerk, gave him the slip of paper, and resumed his place at the tape.

Yet the market continued to decline, and the crowd of traders became jubilant. Eyes glistened, tongues were loosened, and as the paper profits grew larger before their eyes, more than one speculator, taking advantage of a fleeting rally, wrote out and handed in further orders to sell.

It was an exceedingly active day, and one of pronounced weakness as well. In the course of another hour, Union Pacific had run off two points more, and then, as a second flash appeared, Blagden bought a second lot, and about two o'clock, as the whole market broke sharply into a state of semi-panic, he purchased the third and last lot of one hundred shares. "And now," he said as he rejoined Mills, "we've done our best. As far as we can tell, we have done exactly what the big men are doing, so if we don't win now, then we never will."

"There's just one thing," rejoined Mills thoughtfully, "that makes me think we will win. And that is this. I've been watching these fellows all day, and I've noticed that while every one of them is ahead on paper, there isn't one solitary man who has actually cashed in. Everyone says the market is going lower; everyone believes it; some of them claim it's going ten, twenty, thirty points below where it is now. It's been a big day--nearly two million shares--and what I'm asking myself is: If these men, and others like them, are doing the selling, then who in the name of goodness is doing the buying?"

Blagden nodded. "Tubby," he answered, "I've been thinking that same thing. But all I'm wondering is, how much lower will they go? With our margin, we ought to be safe for a long time yet, but I should think the market ought to steady pretty soon."

And indeed, about twenty minutes before the close, the decline ceased, and after a brief period of uncertainty, prices actually began to improve. "Only a rally," was the cry around the ticker. "A rally in a bear market." But to Mills and Blagden, watching the tape with the eye of omniscience, every sign and symbol spelt, "Buy! Buy! Buy!" And by closing time the tone of the market had altered so perceptibly that the enthusiasm of the bears was changed to uneasiness, yet still, so firmly does the human mind cling to its cherished hopes and dreams, that not a man covered, but waited, undecided and irresolute, to see what the morning would bring forth.

So the day ended. And for Mills and Blagden there followed an evening of eager expectancy, and a sleepless night. The tone of all the papers was still bearish and pessimistic; all the emphasis was laid upon the decline, and none upon the rally. But when ten o'clock came around again and the market opened, the tape itself told a far different story, and Mills and Blagden, reading spellbound between the lines, could see the mighty touch of a magician's hand. The attack at the start was bold, direct, incisive. Stocks were up two to three points all around. Then came a reaction; the market was made to "look weak"; and bears regained their courage; and put out fresh lines of shorts; then followed a space of comparative inaction, with prices holding firm, and finally, in the noon hour, when most of the traders had gone to lunch, there came a sudden upward spurt which carried quotations to new high levels for the day. Then, with the bears securely hemmed in, began a steady, ceaseless advance, irresistible as the sweep of the incoming sea. Up a quarter, back an eighth; up another quarter, back another eighth; so continued the advance. And just at the close, with new bulls rushing in to buy, and terrified bears scrambling for safety, with the market fairly boiling with excitement, suddenly, before Blagden's watching eyes, appeared the flash to sell, and in a twinkling, too eager for his profits to think of waiting to sell upon a scale, he shot the three hundred shares of Union upon the market, and sold them at the top price for the day.

That night, over the most expensive dinner they could invent, the pair, incoherent with happiness, reviewed the day's experiences, and laid their plans for the morrow.

"Seventeen hundred dollars, Tubby," Blagden repeated, over and over again. "Can you grasp it? Seventeen hundred dollars in two days. And that's only a taste; only first blood. Now we'll go short, and down she'll go; then we'll load up again. A flood of gold, Tubby. What does the Bible say? 'The earth is ours and the fullness thereof.'"

And Tubby, his red face much redder even than usual, grew maudlin over the champagne and the thoughts of the delights which awaited him until at last grief assailed him, and he nearly wept as he uttered the plaint of all the ages, "Sho much fun livin', it's shame to think we're goin' die."

CHAPTER XVIII

Fate is Fickle

In the dim light of the early summer dawn Marshall Hamilton paced restlessly to and fro across his study floor. He had returned from the pursuit of Stoat to find that Helen had summoned Doctor Rowland, the local physician, and had herself superintended the removal of Atherton's body to the room left vacant by Bellingham. Shortly afterward, the doctor had arrived, and although at a first cursory examination he had shaken his head ominously, he was now engaged in a more careful study of the patient's injuries, to see if human skill could restore to life the flame which alternately seemed to flicker, and then to subside, in the breast of the erstwhile chauffeur.

Yet it was not of the injured man that Marshall Hamilton was thinking, for though he realized that it was to Atherton's bravery that he owed his daughter's life, yet long years in the atmosphere of high finance had so accustomed him to viewing the world in its immensity that outside the scope of his own immediate family he had gradually become a man of no emotions whatsoever. Mankind, to him, meant no longer the isolated individual, but a vast, teeming mass of

habits, customs, tendencies; interesting, if studied in the bulk; wearisome and insignificant, if reduced to a single microcosm. And Atherton, therefore, was no more to him than any other pawn in the game; this pawn had saved his Queen, and that was all.

But with regard to the banker's own affairs, so strangely disturbed by this mysterious sequence of events which had threatened the system of which he was the chief, here the situation was disconcerting in the extreme. Only once before, in the twenty years of his leadership, had there been room even for a suspicion that their secret was in danger, and then, without waiting to discover whether or not these suspicions were well founded, the man who had been the occasion of them had suddenly disappeared, and everything had continued as before. But this recent chain of incidents had been infinitely more alarming, for there had been a cohesion between them which seemed to indicate not the haphazard gropings of a single individual, but the concerted effort of a group of bold and intelligent men.

To be sure, the attempt of McKay's chauffeur to follow his employer had not caused them any great anxiety. Precautions, of course, had been taken; among others, the placing of detectives at the houses of both McKay and Hamilton; but no further trouble had been anticipated, and the discovery by one of the detectives that Bellingham was secretly working over the tape had come as an unwelcome shock, for the incident of the chauffeur and the labors of the secretary had been so closely connected in point of time that it seemed improbable that they could have been merely a coincidence. And although, in the case of Bellingham, further investigation might perhaps have shown that the secretary was merely one of the many innocuous "chart fiends," and that there was nothing sinister in his study of the tape, this possibility was strongly negatived by Bellingham's sudden flight, an event which had necessitated his murder upon the very eve of his departure from the country. And here, with this double tragedy, the banker had confidently expected the disturbance to cease, instead of which had ensued, with almost incredible boldness, the events of the night, and the endeavor, within an ace of being successful, at capturing the cypher which held the key to the seemingly purposeless fluctuations of the stock market. Thus the banker was most profoundly disturbed. By what possible chance the secret could have been fathomed--how the impregnable defence of forty years had all at once been beaten down--was wholly incomprehensible. And yet, grave as the situation was, there was still much for which to be thankful. For if Atherton's bullet had not gone to its mark, and the marauder had escaped with the watch, there might easily have resulted a scandal which would have shaken the country from one end to the other. But as it was, it appeared that although by the narrowest of margins they had managed to escape, and the next task was to be on the alert to see whether more attempts would be made, or whether this, as he most devoutly hoped, would be the last.

A knock at the door aroused him, and the imperturbable Martin stood aside to admit Doctor Howland, gray-haired, a trifle bent, but still a hale and vigorous man.

"Well," asked Mr. Hamilton, "how do you find him?"

"He's badly off," the doctor answered. "There's no doubt about that. He is still unconscious, and his heart action is distinctly unfavorable. In fact, Mr. Hamilton, to put it bluntly, I should say that he is at the point of death. Your daughter is still with him; she has been most helpful; but I have sent for a nurse, who will come at once. We will do all we can, and of course, if you say the word, there are other men whom you cay call in consultation. Charles Carrington, for instance, has done wonders in these cases, and Kennedy is good, also, though of the two, I believe Carrington is the more skillful."

The banker nodded. "I see," he responded briefly. "Yes, I think we should do what we can. By all means, I had better send for Carrington."

The doctor jotted a number on a scrap of paper, handed it to the financier, and was about to leave the room when Helen Hamilton, her face as pale as death, met him upon the threshold. "Quick, doctor," she cried, "he's delirious, and trying to get up. I've left Martin with him." And with a deep-drawn breath she added imploringly, "Oh, isn't there anything that you can do?"

The doctor, without replying, strode quickly up the stairs, the banker following at his heels, while Helen, sinking into a chair, and striving to keep back the tears, prayed imploringly to Heaven for the life of the man she loved.

They found Atherton tossing restlessly from side to side, his eyes wide-open and glassy, the flush of fever in his cheeks. Martin was at his side, but as they entered, the bell rang sharply and the butler left the room, leaving Marshall Hamilton and the Doctor alone with the injured man.

Atherton was no longer violent, but plainly enough the events of the last few weeks were passing, in chaos, through his disordered brain, for he muttered to himself unceasingly, and presently, as his voice gathered strength, they could distinguish clearly what he said, although the words seemed ironically trivial. "I like dogs," he whispered confidentially. "He's a good little pup. I'm glad he's all right."

Again Martin entered the room. "A telephone message for Doctor Rowland," he announced. "They would like him to come to Mrs. Horton's at once."

The doctor turned to the financier. "A childbirth case," he explained. "I must go, and as a matter of fact, there is

very little that I can do here. The nurse will arrive at any moment; I have explained to her everything that is to be done. You had better get Carrington." And he hastily left the room.

"Shall I remain here, sir?" inquired the butler, but Hamilton shook his head. "No, look after affairs down stairs," he answered, and Martin withdrew, leaving the banker alone with the unconscious Atherton.

The mutterings ceased; then broke forth again; and presently, quite clearly and with a note of surprise in his tone, the sick man exclaimed, "Marshall Hamilton!"

The banker started. His first thought was that Atherton had suddenly regained consciousness, and involuntarily he stepped forward toward the bed, but Atherton still gazed straight before him, with no sign of recognition in his staring eyes, and whatever it was that had caused the utterance of the banker's name, it was evident that in a few brief seconds he had traversed countless miles of space and numberless hours of time, for now he was talking earnestly with some one else, his voice high-pitched and querulous with anxiety.

"You can't do that, Blagden!" he cried. "That's blackmail. And remember his wife is an invalid. It might kill her if she knew." Then silence, and then again, "I tell you you can't, Blagden; I'll leave it to Mills. How about it, Tubby; you wouldn't do that?"

Again silence. In breathless amazement, Marshall Hamilton stood gazing at the prostrate figure on the bed. He could not mistake the meaning of the words; this message was for him; his sin, long cherished in secret, had found him out. But before he could think or act, another portion of the wild phantasmagoria flashed on the clouded brain, and Atherton, trying hard to raise himself from the pillow, exclaimed eagerly, "On the watch; on the watch for these signals. You're right, Blagden, that's the whole question: verb or noun!"

For the first time in many years, the banker wholly lost his composure; his heart seemed suddenly to contract, and instinctively he clutched at the chair beside him for support. Horror was being piled on horror. Was his whole life an open book? Did the whole world know his secret? In what possible way, after the strict precaution of years, had he and his associates thus betrayed themselves, or been betrayed?

Atherton, exhausted, now lay without motion, breathing rapidly and weakly, and presently, as the banker's glance fell upon the paper in his hand, containing the number of the specialist, with a sudden movement, as if seeking to take vengeance on an inanimate object, he crumpled it and thrust it into his pocket. This man had saved his daughter's life, and it was his bullet that had brought down the escaping thief, but he knew far too much and therefore it was better that he should die.

Again footsteps sounded in the hallway; Martin ushered in the nurse; and the banker, thus relieved, went slowly down the stairs to his study, his mind in a turmoil of apprehension and of actual fear. Helen stood awaiting him upon the threshold. "Is he better?" she cried. "Is there any hope?"

Even for Hamilton, with his thoughts intent upon other things, there could be no mistaking the intensity of her tone. And since he was genuinely fond of his daughter, he answered. "He's about the same." And then without wasting words, he added, "Why? Do you care for him?"

She stood regarding him gravely, and without a trace of false shame, she answered simply, "More than for anyone in the world. I can't live without him. Oh, father, he *must* get well."

Marshall Hamilton hesitated. Through and through, a man of large affairs, he knew well the oath that he had sworn, long years ago; knew it to be his duty to see that by fair means or foul Atherton's mouth was closed forever. Yet knowing all this, here stood his only daughter, agonized, beseeching. There was a moment's tense silence; then the banker turned and pressed the electric bell. "We'll do what we can, dear," he said, and as Martin, immaculate, unruffled and debonair, answered his call, he handed him a crumpled bit of paper. "Get Doctor Carrington at once," he ordered. "Tell him expense doesn't matter; I must have him here at once. Tell him it's a case of life and death."

CHAPTER XIX

The Sowers of the Wind

All through the night and the early morning a summer northeaster had lashed the city streets; the pavements glistened with moisture; the hurrying rainclouds obscured the sun. But now, as the day advanced, the wind veered to the north,

and presently appeared patches of blue sky, and a ray of sunshine, piercing its way through the curtains of the room, fell upon the face of the slumbering Mills, as he lay breathing heavily, mouth parted, and the mottled red and white of his cheeks bearing witness to the excesses of the past two weeks.

Presently, as the sunbeam reached the level of his eyes, he twitched and stirred uneasily, and finally awakening, sat bolt upright with a sound midway between a yawn and a groan, and extending his legs over the side of the bed, remained inert, supporting his aching head in his hands. Then, perceiving that Blagden still slept, he seized a pillow and flung it with such certain aim that his companion, thus rudely aroused, started up spasmodically from his couch and perceiving the cause for his awakening, scowled savagely, growled, "Oh, don't act like a damned kid," and tried to compose himself for further slumber. But the shock had been effectual, and at length, realizing the futility of the attempt, he assumed the same position occupied by Mills, and heavy-eyed and blinking, the pair sat gazing at each other across the room.

"Blagden," said Mills solemnly, "do you care to know my genuine, sincere opinion of life in general?"

Blagden grinned faintly. "If you feel the way I do," he answered, "I can guess it right now. But if it will cheer you up to get it off your mind, why go ahead."

Mills needed no further encouragement. "Life," he observed, "is a fake; an ugly, rotten fake. There's no fun in it; there's no good in it; there's no pleasure; there's no satisfaction. It's dust and ashes, and I'm tired and sick of it."

Blagden's smile broadened. "Well, of all the ingratitude," he rejoined. "When we made our first clean-up, a fortnight ago, you told me life was the most splendid, gorgeous, wonderful thing imaginable. If things had gone against us since then, you might complain, but they haven't; everything that could come our way has come our way. The system is perfect; where we had six thousand dollars we have fifteen thousand now; and in a year we'll have to hire a special safety deposit vault. And in the meantime think of the pace we've set. Have we been temperance advocates, preachers of the Gospel, haters of women? The answer is; No, decidedly and emphatically, No. It has been some fortnight; some happy little fortnight, Tubby, my boy."

Mills groaned. "That's just the trouble," he complained. "All my life, I've looked forward to the time when I could travel as fast as I wanted to, without caring a hang for the expense. And now that I've done it, what a mess it's been. I don't want to eat or drink again as long as I live, and as for women--" he shuddered--"Good Lord, Blagden, I can't bear the thought of them. Lumps of flesh, with wide-open mouths, crying 'Give, give, give!' Beasts, that's all they are; ugly, crawling beasts; to the deuce with the whole of them."

He passed a shaking hand across his eyes, trying to brush away the film of cobweb which hung there. But his hand passed through it, and the film remained.

Blagden looked at him curiously. "Better pull up a bit, Tubby," he admonished. "You don't want a session with the D. Ts. I know just how you feel, but wait till you've had a bath and a bracer, and you'll be all right again. In fact, you've got to be all right again; this is the night we're going out to Danforth's for a time with those girls from the south. Had you forgotten?"

"By Jove, I had," Mills acknowledged. But at the thought of Danforth and the pictures he had shown them, the embers of gorged and glutted lust began to glow again. "Well," he said more cheerfully, "this will be a bit different from the usual thing. Besides that, we'll be in the country. What a damnable place the city is. You know, Blagden," he went on confidentially, gazing straight before him, "sometimes lately I catch myself doing something I've never done before; I keep thinking back to when I was a kid. I suppose that's a sign I'm growing old. Why, darn it all, I can remember the room I used to have, and the little white bed, and the long summer nights with the crickets singing away outside in the moonlight, and there I'd lie awake, kind of wondering what it was all about, anyway, and thinking how fine it would be to grow up to be a man. And now--"

His voice died away. "You've got the same idea," observed Blagden, "as the man who said that the country boy comes to the city and works hard all his days to earn enough so that at the end of his life he can go back and live in the country again."

"And he was right!" cried Mills. "That's the absolute truth. This money game is all rot. I want the country again. The grass and the brooks and the trees, the singing of the birds, the sweep of the sky over the hills, sunrise and sunset--Oh God--oh God--"

Once more he passed his hand over his burning eyes. Blagden, rising, walked over and laid a hand on his shoulder. "There, there," he said not unkindly, "I never knew *you* had nerves. We'd better send you away for a week; I can look after things here."

With an effort, Mills regained control of himself. "Confound it all," he cried, "I must be in poor shape to act like this. Excuse me, Blagden, I'm all right now." Then, as another thought struck him, he added, "But think of this fellow Danforth that we've been so thick with. How on earth does he stand it? He's no athlete; he's not half my size. But he's stayed with us for two weeks; drink for drink; girl for girl. And I swear he's as fresh as when we started. How do you

account for that?"

"This man Danforth," Blagden answered, "is a product of little old New York. And that is half the battle. But even at that, he's a wonder. All of him that isn't steel is whipcord and whalebone, and he carries a copper riveted boiler where his stomach ought to be. In short, he's a bear and a bird, and an all-around phenomenon, and as a physical specimen I take off my hat to him. But as a speculator, Tubby, he's the worst I ever saw. He's been losing money like water."

"I know he has," Mills answered. "And it's a shame, too, because he's an awfully decent little chap. I couldn't help tipping him off the other day. He was long of stocks in a market that was just going to break wide open, and I told him to get out. He did, too, and only just in time. I saved him from a slaughter."

Blagden looked troubled. "Be careful, Tubby," he admonished. "We don't want to get the reputation of being money makers; that's our one danger now. I'd rather act as if we were losing it; in fact, I think we'd better lose occasionally just to cover up our tracks. However, I guess there's no harm done. Danforth is harmless, and we owe him something for the time he's going to give us to-night."

An hour later they discovered Danforth, flower in buttonhole, spruce and smiling after three hours' sleep, displaying to the customers at Floyd & Meredith's a new buck-and-wing step in the centre of the office floor. But he desisted to greet his friends. "It's all right," he told them confidentially, "The girls got in this morning, and to-night will be one great and glorious time. They are ladies, you understand; as fine girls as you'd want to meet anywhere; but chock full of the devil, and once in a while, on the quiet--well, you understand. Take the five-thirty for Fairview; I'll meet you at the station. There's the bell; I'm short of Steel and she's going up on me. See you later." And he leaped for the ticker.

That afternoon Mills and Blagden spent at the ball game, but managed to reach the train in time, and Danforth, meeting them at their destination, whirled them away in his motor along the winding country roads through groves of pines, past fertile meadows, and by stretches of marsh where the sunset stained the pools of water as red as blood. "Lonely," said Danforth, "but I like it. And especially for a time like this. Here we are, safe and sound."

The motor drew up in front of the plain old country house, and as they followed their guide into the hall, they could see through an open doorway the table bright with silver and linen, set for six. "The girls," Danforth explained, "have been spending the day at Eastfield. They're coming over by motor; ought to be here any minute now. Just let me show you your room."

They followed him upstairs, and down the upper hall to the rear of the house, where he flung open the door of the guest room, and stood back for them to enter. "There," he said heartily, "make yourselves at home. I'm just going to the kitchen for a minute to see that everything's all right, and I'll be back again in no time."

He departed, closing the door behind him, and Mills throwing himself into an easy chair, gazed around him with approval. The room was old-fashioned and low studded, but comfortably furnished, and the drawn shades and the mellow light from the lamp on the table combined to give it an appearance both homelike and inviting. Blagden, after a similar appreciative glance, followed Mills' example, and both of them, wearied after many days of tense excitement around the ticker, followed by nights of wild carousal, sat in pleasurable silence, their thoughts busied with visions of enjoyment to come.

Presently they heard outside the throbbing of a motor. "There come the ladies," hazarded Mills, but after his surfeit of dissipation, he did not pay their fair companions the compliment of rising from his chair. Nor did Blagden stir. Yet he listened keenly to the sound of the motor, and suddenly observed, "That car wasn't coming, Tubby; it was going. What do you suppose that means?"

"Don't know and don't care," yawned Mills, stretching his huge arms luxuriously above his head, "but I've one fault, though, to find with Danforth's taste. He seems to have a prejudice against ventilation. It's fearfully close in here."

Blagden rose, with just the faintest shadow of anxiety upon his face. "You're right," he agreed. "Let's have some air."

As he spoke, he walked over to the window, snapped up the curtain, and then gave a cry so sharp and so fraught with alarm that Mills involuntarily leaped from his seat, and stood gazing with blanched cheeks at the space where a window should have been, but which, instead, was barricaded by a plate of solid steel. In spite of himself, Mills felt as if the blood had ceased flowing in his veins, and his voice sounded thick and strained as he cried, "What's this? Some fool joke?"

Without a word, Blagden had rushed to the other window, only to encounter a similar barrier. And then suddenly, even in the midst of his excitement, he was aware of a disagreeably penetrating odor in the room. "Tubby," he cried, "it's gas; poison gas! He's trying to murder us. Where does it come from?"

But there was no time to search. Already they began to experience a strange lightheadedness, a singing in the ears, and a numbing heaviness in their limbs. Mills tried the door, found it locked, and terrified and trembling, turned instinctively to his leader. "Blagden," he gasped, "what can we do?" But there came no answer, and he saw that his

comrade had fallen and lay motionless upon the floor. Thus thrown upon his own resources, desperation seized him, and a blind fury at the treachery of the man whom they had trusted as their friend. Hastily crossing the room, and mindful of the old savage drill upon the football field, he ran full speed and hurled himself bodily against the door. Before that terrific impact, the wood split and splintered, and Mills, tearing wildly, with torn fingers, at the gap thus made, managed to force an opening--only to see, shimmering in the lamplight, again the glint of polished steel. And now despair, grim and relentless, gripped his heart. To him, who had loved life so ardently, and had lived it so emptily, appeared the shadow of Death. Staggering, helpless, with blood trickling from nose and mouth, he retreated once again; again, with a last flicker of energy, charged the gate of steel; struck it, full force; fell reeling to his knees; tried to rise, tottered, and then, slowly, like some giant tree beneath the woodsman's axe, he crashed headlong, and lay still.

CHAPTER XX

The End

The glory of the morning turned the world to gold, and presently Atherton awakened, strengthened and refreshed, and for the first time since his accident, feeling that he was really himself once more. Consciousness, or rather semi-consciousness, had returned a week ago, and since that time he had dwelt in a state of delightful convalescence, sleeping, eating, sleeping again, his body slowly regaining the energy destroyed by the ravages of the fever. He had been forbidden to talk, and at first, indeed, his brain had been too incurious for him to wonder greatly concerning the events of the night on which he had been struck down.

Helen herself was safe, for she had come often to relieve the nurse and to sit by his side, while he had purposely feigned sleep for the delight of watching her from half-closed eyes. And Mr. Hamilton was unharmed, for he too had found time to make occasional visits to the sick room. And therefore the success or failure of Stoat's mission had seemed to him, at first, a matter of relative unimportance. But now, as his strength returned, so did his interest in the whole affair, and he found himself hoping that Stoat had achieved what he was after, for that, he felt, would be the surest way of freeing the Hamilton household from danger. And if successful, how, he wondered, were Mills and Blagden progressing with their hair-brained scheme of acquiring riches untold.

His curiosity was soon to be gratified, for that afternoon, after the doctor had made his visit, Marshall Hamilton came into the room, and drew up a chair beside the bed.

"Doctor Carrington informs me," he began, "that you are out of all danger, and on the high-road to recovery."

Atherton felt instinctively that there was something behind the words, and that they were not the mere commonplaces they seemed. "Yes, indeed," he answered. "I'm feeling very fit. Almost as well as ever."

"That is good," the banker answered, "and I am doubly glad, because it now becomes necessary for us to have a talk of some importance."

It was coming, then. Atherton mentally braced himself for the ordeal. "I am ready," he said.

There was silence. Then, "You had two friends," said Marshall Hamilton, "named Blagden and Mills."

Atherton gave him a quick glance, but the face of the financier was inscrutable. Yet Atherton was sure that the "had" was no mere slip of the tongue, and the significance of the word was not lost upon him. "Yes," he answered, "that is so."

"They are dead," said Marshall Hamilton.

Atherton drew a quick breath, and though he heard with emotions strangely mingled, yet sorrow was uppermost in his heart. With Blagden he had differed, and Blagden had played him false, yet he had admired the man's courage, his energy, his enthusiasm, while as for Mills, poor old Tubby had always been a genial, kindly boy. And there was moisture in his eyes and a tightening in his throat as the financier went on, "They played with fire, and the flame consumed them. Yet through no fault of their own. They played boldly for a high stake and they played well. They must have been brave, ingenious, shrewd--"

He paused; then slowly and thoughtfully continued, "I have lived for over fifty years. I have enjoyed this world. I have tried to observe and study both myself and my fellow men. But to me the most fascinating thing in life has been to watch Destiny play its game with us all. Do you believe in God?"

Atherton hesitated. "No," he answered, "I do not think that I do."

"My own belief," said the banker, "is in a God, but not the God of the Bible. Moore, the novelist, has described him in a phrase which I have always admired. 'The Greater Aristophanes.' Isn't that perfect? He is not the blameless, faultless God of Scripture, but infinitely more human. He is a humorist; sometimes a grim one. Doubtless I appear to you to be wandering, but I am not. Here is the point. This Greater Aristophanes has played with us all--with you and your friends, with me and my friends, with my family and with Bellingham, my secretary--weaving us all into a strange, fantastic web, and always on the side of your friends until the final moment. And then--a sudden humor seizes him--he changes sides, and allows a blow to fall on your head. You become ill--delirious--and in your ravings you lay bare the whole mystery which has puzzled me for so long, and incidentally, through no fault of your own, you sign the death warrant of your friends."

Atherton, overwhelmed, lay silent. "Then you know," he said at length, "what the burglary was for?"

For answer, the banker drew forth his watch, held it up before Atherton's eyes, and replaced it in his pocket. "I know everything," he said. "This was no time for half measures. Rightly or wrongly, your belongings have been searched, and I have found the paper which explains the whole affair."

The pause lengthened. Apparently, it seemed to Atherton, the banker was giving him time to assimilate this news, and surely he needed it. And more and more, as he reflected, grew his wonder as to what his position might be. Death had been meted out to Mills and Blagden for their knowledge. Why should he escape? Instinctively he glanced at the financier as if to read his thoughts, and as if he understood the look--indeed, as if he had been expecting it--Hamilton spoke.

"You are, perhaps, wondering," he said, "as to my attitude toward you."

"That," responded Atherton, "is precisely what I should like to know."

"I have been," the banker answered, "greatly puzzled, but it has seemed to me that we should have a moment's talk of a most confidential nature. And I am not," he added grimly, "going to extort any pledge of secrecy. Knowing the fate of Bellingham, of Mills and of Blagden, you will understand why I deem that unnecessary."

In spite of himself, Atherton shuddered. He felt weak, powerless, as if he were lying bound in the path of some huge engine of destruction.

"This system, of which you are cognizant," continued the financier, "really exists. It is our policy to deny it, but with you that would hardly serve. It exists. It has existed for forty years. It is international in its scope, and although vague rumors are occasionally heard regarding it, and it is periodically assailed upon suspicion, so far our secrets have been so well guarded, and the punishment meted out to those who have spied upon us, or even talked about us, have been so crushingly severe, that we have maintained an impregnable defence. The system is open to criticism; I do not deny that. To many men and women it has brought disaster, ruin, and even death. Yet people so constituted that they must gamble in the stock market would probably be unsuccessful in any event in whatever else they undertook; they are the world's weaklings, and their loss means little to the world. Moreover, somebody must rule this country; that is our real defence. Democracy is a farce, a failure, an idle dream. In any land, there must be an aristocracy of brains. Therefore we rule, and on the whole, I think, wisely. We permeate everywhere; we dominate everything; Politics, Commerce, the whole domain of Trade, they are all ours; we are the Country's uncrowned kings. Thus the market is only one source of our revenue, though our most important source. Without us, there would exist a state of chaos. For forty years, we have averted panics; steered the nation through crisis after crisis; our function is really that of a mighty balance wheel. In a word, we do evil that ultimate good may come. Do I make myself clear?"

Atherton had listened, spell-bound. At last doubt had changed to certainty; the picture was complete. "Yes," he answered, "I understand."

"And now," continued Hamilton, "as to your position. By all the rules of the game, you should have ceased to trouble us, two weeks ago. One thing has saved you. Unfortunately for me, it appears that my daughter cares for you. Though why," he added whimsically, "she could not have fallen in love with someone else, is more than I can see."

Atherton flushed. "I know," he began, "I'm not in the least worthy of her--" But the banker cut him short. "There, there," he said, "I wasn't really serious. I believe you are a clean and honorable young man--you have shown that in many ways--and I think I may offer you a choice. You may take a subordinate place in our organization. It will have many attractions. You will prosper; you will make money; you may rise, if you possess the ability, even to the greatest heights of all. But you will give your undivided allegiance. You will rid yourself of all emotions of pity. You will see the lambs led to the shearing; you will help to lead them there. But you will gain the pride of place, and glory in the eyes of men."

Before Atherton's eyes swept a vision of the seething brokerage offices, the eager crowds, the whirring, clicking tickers, the dreamers of dreams that were destined never to come true. And unhesitatingly he answered, "Mr. Hamilton, never again, as long as I live, do I wish to see the inside of a broker's office; never again do I wish to hear the opening

bell, to see the tape begin to tell its lying story. Let me be a poor man all my life; but let me do some honest work, if it's no more than turning out bolts or nails on a machine. Anything in the world but what you offer me."

The banker regarded him, apparently not displeased. "I will not say," he answered, "that you are unwise. We play a great game, but a dangerous one. Our fortunes swell to the bursting point; labor watches and threatens; the people are not blind; it is a condition which may bring about its own cure. There may come revolution, death and destruction--no man can tell. Therefore, you are perhaps wise to choose the factory and the chance to rise through your own endeavors. And that, I take it, is your choice."

"There is nothing," Atherton answered, "that I should like better."

"Very well," the banker responded, "but remember this." And as he spoke, his voice became low and stern. "You have done me more than one favor; I do you one now. But I consider that by doing so we are quits, and more than quits. Forget what you have seen, what you have heard, what you know. Think of it as a dream, dissolving into air. For if ever in the future you breathe one word, one whisper, of what you have learned, you are that moment a dead man, and mine will be the first hand raised to strike you down."

Atherton, without flinching, returned his gaze, realizing as never before the power of this vast order which ruled with such an iron hand, and realizing, too, his own insignificance, his utter helplessness, his inability to do aught else than to comply. "I give you my word," he answered. "What I know is forgotten."

The banker rose. "Then the whole incident," he said, "is closed. I wish you a speedy recovery, and now I think there is another visitor waiting to see you, no doubt impatiently."

He left the room, and Atherton, wearied, for a moment closed his eyes. A splendor of sunshine flooded the world without; an oriole in the swaying elm filled the air with song. All things spoke of youth and life and joy.

So softly did she enter that he did not hear her cross the room, and it was only when he opened his eyes again that he knew that dream and reality were one, and that before them lay the long, bright years, for him and the girl he loved to traverse, side by side.

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